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# THE NEW YORKER

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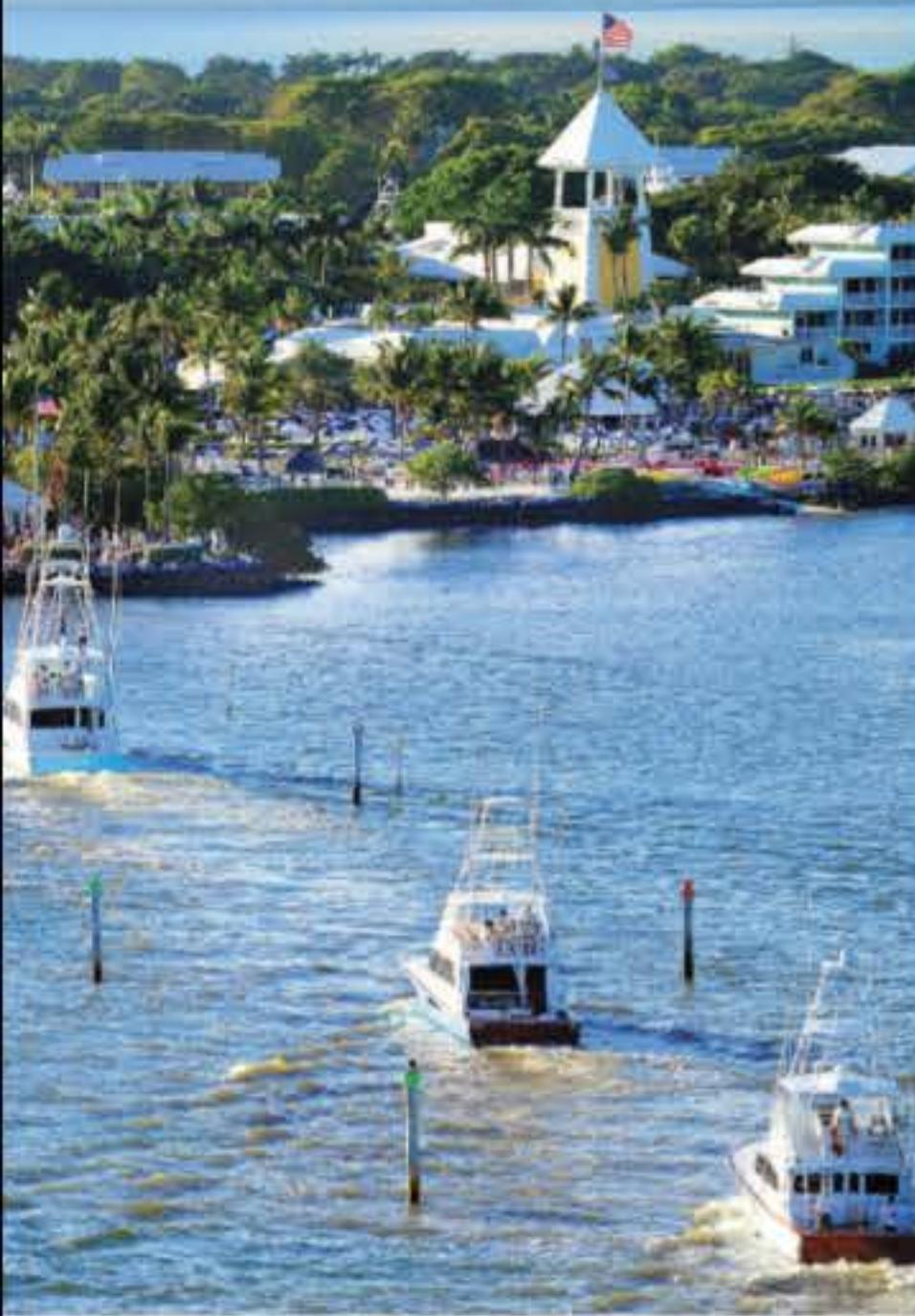
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**Dan Chiasson** (Books, p. 66) teaches English at Wellesley College and has contributed reviews to the magazine since 2007. "Bicentennial" is his latest book of poems.

### THIS WEEK ON NEWYORKER.COM



#### CULTURE DESK

Jon Lee Anderson pays tribute to the singular life of Marie Colvin and recalls their encounters in war zones.



#### THE POLITICAL SCENE

What kind of populist is Elizabeth Warren? Benjamin Wallace-Wells on how the senator talks about corruption.

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# THE MAIL

## REEFER MADNESS?

In Malcolm Gladwell's article about the consequences of marijuana legalization and promotion, he omits a vital detail: the Drug Enforcement Administration categorizes marijuana, like heroin, as a Schedule 1 drug—a substance with no medical value and a high potential for abuse ("Unwatched Pot," January 14th). This makes it nearly impossible for scientists to conduct clinical trials on its use. Gladwell laments the absence of such research without identifying the primary roadblock—the federal government. In summarizing the case against pot, Gladwell airs the views of Alex Berenson, whose alarmist book about marijuana use and violence relies on a questionable patchwork of incomplete research and anecdotal observations. Whether or not marijuana can cause or aggravate mental illness is an important question, deserving of the kind of study that is currently made difficult by the drug's classification and criminalization. Without more research, however, musing by writers about marijuana's link to violent crime is irresponsible. History illustrates the harm done by stoking such fears—even last year, with recreational marijuana use legal in ten states and Washington, D.C., hundreds of thousands of people were arrested for simple possession.

Rebecca McCray  
New York City

Gladwell's second-guessing of marijuana is spot-on. As a psychiatrist who has worked with young people for a long time, I don't see many marijuana success stories, especially when patients have been using the drug regularly for many years. Too often, daily use leads to passivity and decreased motivation. The advent of edibles, which add the addictive effects of sugar to those of marijuana itself, is particularly concerning. Any psychoactive substance that is used daily carries with it the danger of drug with-

drawal and its significant side effects. That being said, arguments about the ills of marijuana should acknowledge the larger social context of drug use in the U.S.: drinking alcohol, for example, may be more culturally accepted than smoking pot, but it remains a far more substantial cause of instability in the lives of teen-agers.

Ron Charach  
Toronto, Ont.

Gladwell ends his piece with a glancing account of the federal government's recent e-cigarette crackdown, which has been led by the commissioner of the F.D.A., Scott Gottlieb. Gladwell wonders why marijuana isn't treated with the same level of alarm. It's important to note, however, that Gottlieb's initiatives represent the most fanatical wing of the anti-nicotine lobby. There are valid public-health concerns about vaping, such as its popularity among teen-agers, but Gottlieb seems intent on downplaying its relative safety compared with smoking regular cigarettes: as Gladwell cursorily mentions, research suggests that e-cigarettes are up to ninety-five per cent less harmful than tobacco products. Some of Gottlieb's proposals, such as charging exorbitant prices for F.D.A. approvals of new products, seem intended to smother the small businesses that fuel the vape industry rather than to improve public health. This approach—shoot first, ask questions later—isn't the best way to insure harm reduction. If Gladwell is trying to turn the conversation to a more nuanced survey of the potential benefits and drawbacks of widespread marijuana use, he would do better to use a different example.

Nathan Osborne  
Milford, Ohio

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JANUARY 16 – 22, 2019

# GOINGS ON ABOUT TOWN



Stephen Sondheim and George Furth's 1981 musical, "**Merrily We Roll Along**," closed after just sixteen performances on Broadway, but its afterlife has been long. The story, about three friends who drift apart as they navigate show business, is told in reverse, starting with disillusioned middle age and winding back to idealistic youth. Fiasco Theatre, the Roundabout's scrappy company-in-residence, is staging a six-person revival at the Laura Pels (in previews), where it previously presented a D.I.Y. version of Sondheim's "Into the Woods."

**NIGHT LIFE**

*Musicians and night-club proprietors lead complicated lives; it's advisable to check in advance to confirm engagements.*

**Eddie Palmieri**  
**Blue Note**

Eddie Palmieri's new album, "Mi Luz Mayor," is dedicated to his late wife, Iraida, and includes songs they would dance to; judging from the propulsive performances that this giant of Latin music elicits from his crack orchestra, the couple must have cut quite a rug. Fusing idiomatic sounds from Puerto Rico, Cuba, and other Latin-American locales with modern jazz, Palmieri's music defines multicultural New York as indelibly as any sound that has arisen from its streets.—Steve Futterman (Jan. 15-20.)

**3Divas**  
**Mezzrow**

This robust trio—an outgrowth of Sherrie Maricle's all-female, labor-of-love big band, Diva—unites the drummer with the bassist Amy Shook and the pianist Jackie Warren, both of whom are occasional members of the long-running aggregate. Cut loose from the necessary heft and the exacting arrangements of a jazz orchestra, this outfit swings standards with enviable panache.—S.F. (Jan. 16.)

**Yams Day**  
**Barclays Center**

January, 2015, dealt hip-hop a crushing blow with the death of the twenty-six-year-old tastemaker and visionary A\$AP Yams. But few people felt the loss as deeply as the members of the collective he co-founded, A\$AP Mob, which is home to the rappers A\$AP Ferg, A\$AP Ant, and A\$AP Rocky, its most visible member. Each year, the Mob celebrates its fallen comrade with a huge home-town concert (aptly called Yams Day), where fans gather for performances from the influential group and special guests. So far, only the spirited rhymers Ski Mask the Slump God has been announced, but, if previous years are any indication, more artists will pop in—many of whom likely owe some part of their creative identities to the inimitable A\$AP Yams.—Briana Younger (Jan. 17.)

**Al Foster's Birthday Bash**  
**Smoke**

The indefatigable drummer Al Foster celebrates his seventy-fifth birthday by manning an appropriately kinetic quintet that includes the trumpeter Jeremy Pelt and the saxophonist Dayna Stephens. Foster, who has stirred up rhythms for the likes of Miles Davis, Sonny Rollins, and McCoy Tyner, among a wide swath of other luminaries, remains a powerhouse percussionist with a poet's touch.—S.F. (Jan. 18-20.)

**Matana Roberts**  
**Issue Project Room**

A fiery and uncompromising saxophone improviser and multidisciplinary artist, Matana Roberts presents the latest incarnation of "I Call America," an evolving series of performances incorporating texts, music, and video projections that serve as a score. Sharing the bill are two artists who similarly defy categorization. Haley Fohr, the singer-songwriter better known as Circuit des Yeux, plies her robust voice, sans lyrics, in "Wordless Music," and Suzanne Langille, a veteran improvising singer, leads an empathetic quartet.—Steve Smith (Jan. 19.)

**Mind Against**  
**99 Scott**

Mind Against, a duo composed of the Berlin-based Italian siblings Alessandro and Federico Fognini, makes limpid tech-house with melodies that refract like light hitting a disco ball just right. Though their sets build in patient waves, their production style—and their taste as d.j.s—favors spare but detailed arrangements rather than a trance-like gloss. They'll play the full evening at this Bushwick venue; an upload of a seven-hour set at the Kompass Klub, in Belgium, from mid-December, offers a preview.—Michaelangelo Matos (Jan. 19.)

**INDIE POP**

Michelle Zauner, the songwriter and vocalist behind the Philadelphia indie-pop act **Japanese Breakfast**, initially based her resplendent second album, "Soft Sounds from Another Planet," on several pieces of intergalactic ephemera, including the loose outline of a space opera and a rejection letter that a friend received from the Mars One program. Over time, Zauner's project became focussed less on outer space and more on finding the ground underneath one's feet. Yet the cosmos is still omnipresent in the immense sounds of the album, and in an online game, Japanese BreakQuest, that Zauner co-developed and scored to coincide with the record's release, in 2017. Live, Zauner's music evokes a similar sense of limitlessness. She performs at Brooklyn Steel, Jan. 17-18.—Paula Mejia

**Shilpa Ray****The Safari Room at El Cortez**

The New Jersey-bred blues-punk songwriter Shilpa Ray possesses a voice—able to transform from a guttural bellow into a shivering wail—is truly remarkable. But, when Ray's not performing, she moonlights working the door at the Lower East Side bar Pianos. In 2017, she immortalized her observations of New York night life on the sensational album "Door Girl"; the result is as fraught and fantastic as the city itself.—Paula Mejia (Jan. 19.)

**Cracker/Camper Van Beethoven**  
**Sony Hall**

As the college rock of the eighties ceded to the alternative rock of the nineties, the singer David Lowery traded the whimsical group Camper Van Beethoven for Cracker, a band with a blue-collar edge and an MTV presence. Each act suited its era without seeming hemmed in by it. Both also aged with grace—in no small measure, because of Lowery's jaded vocal swagger. (Ever dreamed of a Harrison Ford hero swapping his blaster for a microphone? Then Lowery's your man.) Time has melted any walls, stylistic or otherwise, that once divided the groups, which now frequently share a bill. Fittingly, the long-reunited Camper opens.—Jay Ruttenberg (Jan. 20.)

## AT THE BALLET



After the last “Nutcracker” snowflake has been swept away, **New York City Ballet’s** serious business begins. The company’s winter season, at the David H. Koch Theatre Jan. 22–March 3, opens with a triptych of Balanchine ballets on ancient Greek themes: “Apollo,” “Orpheus,” and “Agon,” all with music by Stravinsky. “Orpheus,” the least seen and the most dated of the three, was made in 1948 and has a whiff of Martha Graham about it. (For starters, the costumes and the sets are by Noguchi.) Justin Peck’s newest opus, with music by the singer-songwriter Sufjan Stevens, will be revealed the following week; this will be their fifth collaboration. It shares a bill with “Herman Schmerman,” a ballet that William Forsythe created for the company in 1992, which was last performed here in full in 1994. (The too-cool-for-school central pas de deux is shown on its own from time to time.) Then, after two weeks devoted to Peter Martins’s efficient “Sleeping Beauty,” the company brings back Balanchine’s quietly rapturous “Liebeslieder Walzer.”—*Marina Harss*

K-Hand  
Good Room

Kelli Hand was the first female d.j. and producer to emerge from the early Detroit-techno scene; her débüt recording was released in 1990. She has long been a draw on the decks, focussing on synths that unfurl unhurriedly but with force. A set for *Trax Magazine*, from last January, showcases Hand’s curling, menacing acid lines, such as those from “My Head Is on Fire,” by Coyu and Reinier Zonneveld, featuring La CouCou.—*M.M.* (Jan. 20.)

## DANCE

Cuba Festival  
Joyce Theatre

The second and final week of the festival is split between two troupes. Los Hijos del Director, making its United States débüt, is contemporary. Its choreographer, George Céspedes, has an aggressively modern style, which he uses in “The Last Resource” to push back against outside forces encroaching on Cuba. Compañía Irene Rodríguez brings a program of short selections,

whose title, “Más Que Flamenco” (“More Than Flamenco”), suggests some of the company’s Afro-Cuban and classical Spanish influences. But flamenco is the group’s specialty—as is showcasing Rodriguez, its fervent star.—*Brian Seibert* (Jan. 15–20.)

Nederlands Dans Theatre 2  
City Center

Known for its continually expanding repertory of new works by a roster of European choreographers, Nederlands Dans Theatre is the toast of the contemporary-dance crowd. The pieces tend to fit into a chicly post-expressionist or absurdist mold; the favored palette is gray and black, starkly lit. The ensemble coming to City Center is the company’s junior troupe, a group of sixteen classically trained dancers ranging in age from seventeen to twenty-three. They will perform a quadruple bill that includes Marco Goecke’s 2017 “Wir Sagen Uns Dunkles” (“Darkness Spoken”)—a twitchy exploration of the relationship between dancer and choreographer, set to Schubert, Schnittke, and the British rock band Placebo—and “Mutual Comfort,” by Edward Clug, the choreographer of Diana Vishneva’s recent techno ballet, “Sleeping Beauty Dreams.”—*Marina Harss* (Jan. 16–19.)

Movement Research  
Museum of Modern Art

In the final weeks of the MOMA exhibition “Judson Dance Theater: The Work Is Never Done,” the live events get hands-on, as Movement Research hosts free classes and workshops (registration required) in the Marron Atrium. The faculty is packed with such luminaries of experimental dance as Michelle Boulé, Bebe Miller, and Vicky Shick. A workshop with Ishmael Houston-Jones or a “Fun Friday” class with Antonio Ramos should be something to see, even if you aren’t participating. The full schedule is at moma.org.—*B.S.* (Jan. 17–25.)

“Choreography of Light”  
Guggenheim Museum

As a lighting designer for dance, Brandon Stirling Baker is accustomed to having his work direct focus rather than steal it. But for this “Works & Process” event his art is out front. He’s designed three ballets for the occasion—one playing with color, another demonstrating varieties of white—and has asked Jamar Roberts, of the Alvin Ailey company, to choreograph solos in partnership with the changing light. The program also features an excerpt from a work in progress by Baker’s most frequent collaborator, Justin Peck, with the lighting designed live for the audience and a discussion moderated by the *New Yorker* contributor Marina Harss.—*B.S.* (Jan. 18 and Jan. 20.)

## ART

“Epic Abstraction”  
Metropolitan Museum

A desire to shake up received art history is more than admirable today—it’s urgent for a future of pluralist values. But this wishfully canon-expanding show of painting and sculpture from the past eight decades effectively reinforces the old status quo. The first room affects like a mighty organ chord: it contains the Met’s two best paintings by Jackson Pollock: “Pasiphaë” (1943), a quaking compaction of mythological elements, and “Autumn Rhythm (Number 30)” (1950), a singing orchestration of drips—bluntly material and, inextricably, sublime. The adjective “epic” does little enough to honor Pollock’s mid-century glory, which anchors the standard art-historical saga of Abstract Expressionism as a revolution that stole the former thunder of Paris and set a stratospheric benchmark for subsequent artists. The show takes the old valuation as a given without mentioning its vulnerabilities: rhetorical inflation, often, and macho entitlement, always. This perspective casts artists whose works reacted against or shrugged off Abstract Expressionism as little fish around the Leviathan.—*Peter Schjeldahl* (Ongoing.)

“Hilma af Klint”  
Guggenheim Museum

When the Swedish painter and mystic Hilma af Klint died, in 1944, at the age of eighty-two, she left instructions that none of her work

be shown until twenty years after her death, including her magnum opus—a hundred and ninety-three paintings, made between 1906 and 1908, intended for display in a temple only sketchily conceived, much less built. Seventy-six of those are on view in this flabbergastingly retrospective, titled "Paintings for the Future." A case is being made by some art historians that af Klint was the inventor of abstract painting, beating Wassily Kandinsky to the title by five years. But the claim compels only if you're still in thrall to the weary modernist mythos of progress in art. Today, when "art" has come to mean anything that you can't think of another word for, the game of historical priorities is turning into a sport for specialists. But the concentrated spirituality—egoless consciousness—that is delivered by the best pictures here, so fresh that they might have been made this morning or tomorrow or decades from now, feels like news that is new again.—P.S. (Through Apr. 23.)

## "Liliana Porter"

Museo del Barrio

For forty-five years, this puckish Argentinian-born, New York-based artist has accomplished big things with little objects. This is Porter's first one-person museum show in more than twenty years; she deserves wider recognition for her pointed use of toys and miniatures. From afar, her 2013 work "Untitled with Fallen Things" looks like an Action painting—a glorious rush of periwinkle flooding the canvas from the upper right. But look closely and you'll see that the torrent of paint carries doll-house furniture, tiny wagon axles, and a plastic horse. In the sculpture "Forced Labor (Sweeping Woman)," conceived in 2004 and reinstalled here, a Lilliputian woman armed with a broom faces a trail of bright powder pigment, which extends down the length of a long pedestal. Humor with a socially critical edge unites the artist's cross-disciplinary œuvre in this uncluttered show, which will be many visitors' introduction to Porter's singular strain of Pop Conceptualism.—Johanna Fateman (Through Jan. 27.)

## "Posing Modernity"

Wallach Art Gallery

This historically significant and aesthetically illuminating show, subtitled "The Black Model from Manet and Matisse to Today," centers on the black female form as she appears and reappears in the work, lives, and imaginations of a number of painters, photographers, and filmmakers. The curator Denise Murrell has done an outstanding job—grand in intellectual scope—of outlining not only how race and gender intersect in several noteworthy canvases, such as Manet's portrait of the Haitian-born actress Jeanne Duval, who was Charles Baudelaire's muse, but also how race influenced the politics and style of Paris in the nineteenth century, as evinced by the prominence of certain performers and personalities, such as the aerialist known as Miss La La. There is a falling off toward the end of the show, when Ellen Gallagher and other contemporary artists emerge (their work is too didactic compared with the subtleties one finds in Romare Bearden's take on the Euro-

pean idea of the "exotic," for instance), but it's a mesmerizing display—deeply felt, accurate, and necessary.—Hilton Als (Through Feb. 10.)

## "The Progressive Revolution"

Asia Society

In 1947, in the wake of the Partition, six men in Bombay (now Mumbai), most of them painters, formed the Progressive Art Group. Their work would represent the new India, rejecting the namby-pamby, Raj-influenced Bengal School in favor of a bold new approach, secular and international, inspired as much by European Cubism and Japanese scroll paintings as by the Mughal miniatures and folk traditions of their own country. History likes its summaries tidy, but the P.A.G.'s art, like the subcontinent, sprawls beyond convenient narratives, as the eighty works here, made by twelve artists between 1944 and 1997, make clear, from the agitated figuration of F. N. Souza to the tranquil, landscape-inflected abstraction of V. S. Gaitande. If the show has a lodestar, it might be Souza's urgent self-portrait, painted, in 1949, in a palette so fevered that even the blues and the greens look hot to the touch. He stands

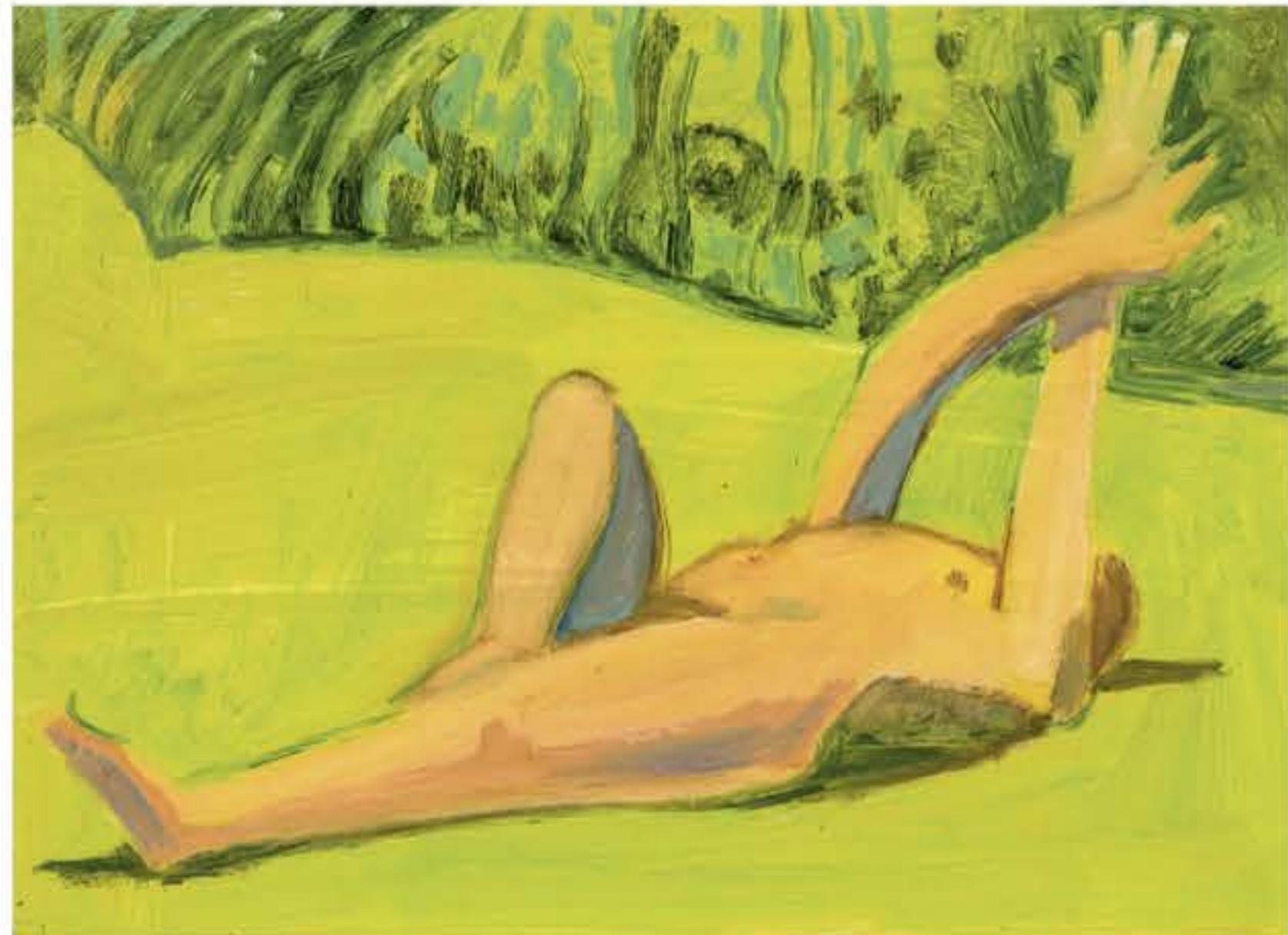
naked, directly regarding the viewer, holding a paintbrush like a tool with which to build a new world.—Andrea K. Scott (Through Jan. 20.)

## "Sarah Lucas: Au Naturel"

New Museum

Works by the scrumptiously naughty Brit fill three floors. The sculptures, photographs, videos, and installations run to jokes about genitals (clownish phalli, insolent female parts) and a lampoon of religion, including a life-size crucified Jesus covered in a mosaic of Marlboro cigarettes, for some reason. Plaster casts of the nude bottom halves of eight friends, posed sassily on furniture and plumbing fixtures, sport cigarettes stuck in one or the other orifice. Is it fun? Sure, though the show is rather one-note in its effects of calculated cheekiness. Lucas, one of the Young British Artists who frisked to fame three decades ago, is expert at both fabrication and mise en scène—a real pro with materials and adept at exploiting her raffish personal charm. Billboard-size photographic self-portraits tickle by presenting a hopelessly nice-looking person in butch poses: the artist as weaponized gamine.—P.S. (Through Jan. 20.)

## AT THE GALLERIES



Most people use five-by-seven-inch sheets of aluminum as a refuge against the outdoors—they help keep a roof watertight. Not **Lois Dodd**, who, at ninety-two, still carries them into the landscape of Maine to paint en plein air, as she has for decades, part poet and part reporter. Flashing, the material's name, also tidily summarizes her process: Dodd paints quickly with oils, wet into wet, finishing each little gem in one session. Eighty-five of these pictures line the walls of the Alexandre gallery, in midtown (through Feb. 9). The time of day and the scale both shift, as Dodd zooms out to float a dime-size amber moon in an inky night sky or zooms in to discover a yellow sunflower petal in a shady patch of green grass. Bodies appear, most endearingly as a series of fleshy female nudes. The show is an antidote to ostentation, until Dodd introduces a handful of non-plein-air Trumps, a jarring reminder that there's now no respite from politics in American life.—Andrea K. Scott

## RECITALS

The French coloratura soprano **Sabine Devieilhe** puts her bulletproof technique and milky timbre in service to her interpretive ambitions. For her latest, Grammy-nominated album, "Mirages," she performs arias and songs that reveal the fascination of late-nineteenth-century French composers with far-flung locales like India and the Middle East. With singing that feels supple yet sure, she looks beyond the fantasy of imagined lands to give the pieces a bold sense of inner life. Devieilhe includes one of the selections from her record, Maurice Delage's beguiling "Quatre Poèmes Hindous," in her all-French program with the pianist Mathieu Pordoy at Carnegie's Weill Recital Hall, on Jan. 17, alongside reliable enchantments from Debussy, Poulenc, and Ravel.—*Oussama Zahr*



## CLASSICAL MUSIC

## Yefim Bronfman

David Geffen Hall

On first encounter, Rachmaninoff's second symphony, with its stately string lines and yearning, burnished clarinet solos, could easily be mistaken for an hour of soft-focus orchestral entertainment. In fact, it's a work of depth and dignity—a vibrant emotional vision, shaded by wistful sadness, taut fugal writing, and glittering dance passages—that will prosper with the New York Philharmonic. Here, the piece's mature Romanticism is a sharp contrast to Beethoven's energetic early Piano Concerto No. 2, with which the famed soloist Yefim Bronfman opens the program; Jaap van Zweden conducts. Also this week, members of the orchestra's in-house string quartet join Bronfman at the 92nd Street Y for a concert that includes Schumann's indelible Piano Quintet.—*Fergus McIntosh* (Jan. 16 and Jan. 22 at 7:30, Jan. 18 at 11 A.M., and Jan. 19 at 8; Jan. 20 at 3.)

## "Meditations for Joséphine"

Metropolitan Museum

Julia Bullock, a radiant young soprano whose work is driven by intelligence and purpose, reprises a signature project, "Joséphine Baker: A Portrait"—conceived with the director Peter Sellars, the composer Tyshawn Sorey, and the poet Claudia Rankine and introduced in 2016—recasts songs associated with the iconic Jazz Age artist as a melancholy rite. The new piece, which Bullock will perform with the International Contemporary Ensemble, evokes historic racial conflict with acute and timely resonances.—*Steve Smith* (Jan. 16-17 at 8.)

niques are everyday affairs, presents four modern works that draw on that duality. In Karola Obermüller's "mass:distance:time," tripping, breathless voices expand quotations from a medieval mass into delicate caverns of sound. Salvatore Sciarrino's "12 Madrigali"—a double setting of six haiku by the Japanese poet Basho, here receiving its U.S. première—re-creates phenomena as grand as the noonday sun and as humble as crickets. Performed in the atmospheric crypt of this church in northern Harlem, the program (which also includes pieces by Carola Bauckholt and Claus-Steffen Mahnkopf) promises total acoustic immersion.—*F.M.* (Jan. 17 at 7:30.)

## Cantata Profana

St. Peter's Church

Mixing early music with contemporary fare isn't as uncommon as it once was, but few institutions take to the task with the thorough consideration consistently shown by Cantata Profana. "Visions of Silence," an ambitious program even by this group's own standard, is built around Salvatore Sciarrino's "Infinito Nero." Alongside that ecstatic 1998 monodrama are seventeenth-century works by Tarquinio Merula and Alessandro Piccinini and modern pieces by Alvin Lucier and Galina Ustvolskaya, including the latter's stark, grave Symphony No. 5.—*S.S.* (Jan. 18-19 at 8.)

Chamber Music Society  
Rose Studio

The Society musters a fistful of compelling musicians—the pianist Gilles Vonsattel and the Escher String Quartet—for a mix of new and recent pieces, spanning a broad stylistic range. "All Roads," a new quintet by Anthony Cheung, whose works have a heady, sophisticated appeal, receives its New York première. Also on the program are pieces by Per Nørgård, William Bolcom, and Ed Bennett.—*S.S.* (Jan. 17 at 6:30 and 9.)

## "Kurt Weill's Berlin"

Peter Jay Sharp Theatre

Kurt Weill's pungent cabaret music immediately conjures Weimar Berlin, that brief, carefree interlude between the wars, when it wasn't clear that the world was about to fall off another cliff. His works, including excerpts from "Happy End," "Der Silbersee," and "Aufstieg und Fall der Stadt Mahagonny," take up half the New York Festival of Song's program, but his contemporaries Friedrich Hollaender and Hanns Eisler each get a turn in the spotlight with their sexy, sophisticated ditties. The company's artistic director and preferred pianist, Steven Blier, accompanies singers from Juilliard's Marcus Institute for Vocal Arts.—*Oussama Zahr* (Jan. 17 at 7:30.)

## "Madrigals and Animals"

Church of the Intercession

The human voice, heard unaccompanied, is at once sacred and profane. Perhaps that's why many choral composers, when not writing music for use in church, have concerned themselves with evoking the pleasures and the wonders of the natural world. The chamber choir Ekmeles, for whom microtones and extended vocal tech-

## "Pelléas et Mélisande"

Metropolitan Opera House

The elusive harmonies and fountain of colors in Debussy's only opera make it feel like a tone poem that depicts the intertwining of love and need. The Met's new music director, Yannick Nézet-Séguin, explores the score's depths with a strong cast—including Isabel Leonard, Paul Appleby, Marie-Nicole Lemieux, Kyle Ketelsen, and Ferruccio Furlanetto—in Jonathan Miller's haunting production.—*O.Z.* (Jan. 19 at 12:30 and Jan. 22, Jan. 25, and Jan. 31 at 7:30.)

## Maxwell String Quartet

Johnson/Kaplan Hall

Scotland's Maxwell Quartet has won critical acclaim and audience approval overseas with its effervescent sound and buoyant energy. For the group's U.S. début—presented under the aegis of the venerable Schneider Concerts series—it performs canonical works by Haydn (Op. 71, No. 3) and Schumann (Op. 41, No. 1), which flank a contemporary piece, "Visions at Sea," by the Dutch composer Joey Roukens.—*S.S.* (Jan. 20 at 2.)

New Jersey Symphony Orchestra  
New Jersey Performing Arts Center

Xian Zhang, the New Jersey Symphony's music director, conducts two works that conjure complementary visions of nature and mortality, each featuring the luminous soprano Dawn Upshaw. Flashes of improvisation enhance "Winter Morning Walks," the composer Maria Schneider's elegant setting of nine poems that Ted Kooser wrote while recovering from cancer. That work is paired with Mahler's vernal Symphony No. 4, with its touching evocation of a heavenly afterlife, viewed from a child's perspective.—*S.S.* (Jan. 20 at 3.)

## THE THEATRE

## Choir Boy

Samuel J. Friedman

Tarell Alvin McCraney's 2013 play, directed then, as now, by Trip Cullman, takes place at Drew, a prep school for boys of color. Pharus (Jeremy Pope), the ebullient, effeminate choir leader, is belting out a solo when he's interrupted by hisses of "sissy," and worse. The culprit is Bobby (J. Quinton Johnson), an insecure legacy student and the nephew of the school's long-suffering Headmaster Marrow (Chuck Cooper), but a Drew man never snitches, so Pharus flexes his own authority and kicks Bobby out of the choir. What ensues is a feel-good drama, coated in a thin varnish of conflict and punctuated with gospel numbers, that plays too willingly into the audience's expectations to elicit much real feeling at all. Shame is flashed, then sublimated; be-yourself tolerance, expressed by a kindly jock, wins the day, but, given the play's reassuring emotional patness, the victory feels too easily won.—*Alexandra Schwartz (Through Feb. 24.)*

## Gloria

Daryl Roth

The Daryl Roth Theatre has been converted into Gloria Steinem's living room, complete with cozy Persian rugs and books, for Emily Mann's new "bio-play" celebrating the writer and activist. As Steinem, Christine Lahti whizzes through the stations of her subject's life, from undercover Playboy Bunny to the founder of *Ms.* magazine and poster woman for second-wave feminism; a diverse supporting ensemble plays allies and mentors such as Bella Abzug, Florynce Kennedy, and Wilma Mankiller. In Act II, the lights come up for an audience-driven "talking circle." On a recent evening, Steinem herself arrived to lead a raw, rousing conversation. "I need you," Steinem told a young woman distressed by the Kavanaugh hearing. "And you need me, because I remember when it was worse." Diane Paulus directs.—*A.S. (Through March 31.)*

## LaBute New Theatre Festival

Davenport

The prolific playwright, film director, and TV showrunner Neil LaBute's reputation for controversy and mercuriality intensified early last year, when New York's MCC Theatre suddenly and with little explanation terminated its fifteen-year relationship with him. But LaBute's close ties to the St. Louis Actors' Studio, which since 2013 has produced an annual roster of one-acts called the LaBute New Theatre Festival, remain intact. The one-act play is a form that LaBute has returned to again and again, to touch a wide range of raw nerves—even the titles of the three shorts premiering in this program suggest an intercontinental variety pack of provocations. LaBute directs "Unlikely Japan," in which a woman reacts to seeing an old love on TV, and John Pearson directs both "Great Negro Works of Art," about a painter and his gallerist, and "The Fourth Reich," in which a man discusses his favorite artist (that's right: Hitler).—*Rollo Romig (Through Jan. 27.)*

## Network

Belasco

Bryan Cranston is terrific as the star of Ivo van Hove's energetic stage adaptation of the 1976 movie, in which the "mad as hell" newscaster Howard Beale decries corporate greed, political impotence, and the breakdown of trust and decency. The sinister power of television is his sermon, and television the pulpit from which he preaches; Jan Versweyveld's set design makes clever use of screens to produce the quick-cut pace of cinema. Once "Network" has made its point about corruption, apathy, and entertainment, however, it keeps on making it, and secondary characters, like the viperous young exec Diana Christensen (Tatiana Maslany), get flattened in the process. A new epilogue informing us that "the only total commitment any of us can have is to other people" may appeal to those who wax nostalgic for an era of unified news broadcasts, but Beale's treacle can't hold a candle to his brimstone. (Reviewed in our issue of 12/17/18.)—*A.S. (Through April 28.)*

## The New One

Cort

Mike Birbiglia's latest solo show was a hit in a small theatre, but his low-key approach translates surprisingly well to Broadway's more capacious Cort. Here, he turns his path to father-

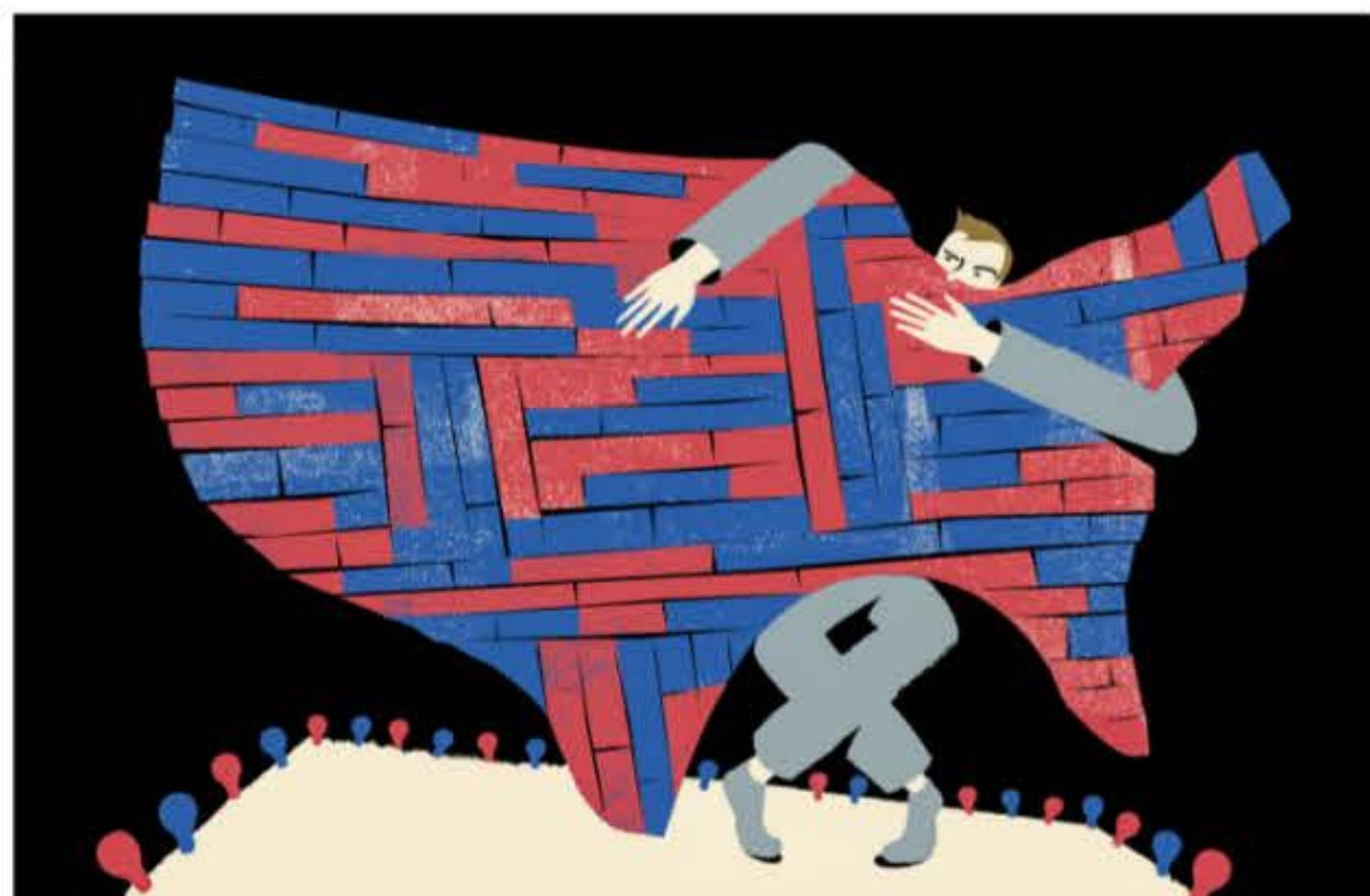
hood into a suspenseful tale: Will he overcome his long-standing aversion to having a child? Will he make it through his litany of medical ailments and conceive? Will his marriage be irredeemably changed (read: wrecked)? (The comedian's wife, Jennifer Hope Stein, is credited with "additional writing"; Seth Barrish directs.) Birbiglia's main weapon is his deceptively indolent delivery, which is paired with a milquetoast demeanor that barely conceals dark undercurrents about the way men, or at least some of them, experience having kids. "I think I get why dads leave," he says, after a particularly hellish night. Birbiglia speaks as softly as ever, but it smarts.—*Elisabeth Vincentelli (Through Jan. 20.)*

## The Prom

Longacre

In this new Broadway musical, directed and choreographed by Casey Nicholaw, the disappointed stars of a theatrical flop, Dee Dee Allen (the terrific belter Beth Leavel) and Barry Glickman (Brooks Ashmanskas, revelling in camp), decide to rehabilitate their image by doing something good for someone else. A small-town Indiana teen-ager (the appealingly genuine Caitlin Kinunen) has been barred from taking her girlfriend to the high-school prom, and so Dee Dee and Barry gather a band of similarly clueless and self-involved fellow-actors to eradicate red-state homophobia and help heal the country's political

## OFF BROADWAY



America may be hopelessly polarized, but Colin Quinn is here to help. In his new comic solo show, "**Colin Quinn: Red State Blue State**" (in previews and opening Jan. 22, at the Minetta Lane), the "Saturday Night Live" alumnus brings his blusterer-at-the-end-of-the-bar routine to our political divide, mouthing off in slurry Brooklynese on Twitter mobs, microaggressions, and toxic masculinity. Sound dicey? In his previous one-man shows, Quinn has been dauntless in his choice of topics, which have included America's founding document (in "Unconstitutional"), his home city (in "The New York Story"), and the history of the world (in "Long Story Short"). As for the state of the nation, it may look bad, but Quinn sees glimmers of hope. "We still have the best towels of any country," he says.—*Michael Schulman*

divide through the power of song and dance. The music and the lyrics, by Matthew Sklar and Chad Beguelin, respectively, temper Broadway schmaltz with a pop-ironic sensibility. Some of the self-parodying obtuseness is more cringey than cute, and yet the show, which knowingly leans deep into kitsch, is at once preposterous and delightful. (11/26/18)—A.S. (Open run.)

## MOVIES

### The Aspern Papers

This new adaptation of Henry James's novella stars Vanessa Redgrave as the aging Juliana Bordereau, who dwells in spartan grandeur, in Venice, cared for by her niece (Joely Richardson). Decades ago, Juliana was the lover of a famous poet, Jeffrey Aspern, and a wealth of documents relating to him is said to remain in her clutches. Enter Morton Vint (Jonathan Rhys Meyers), a devilish scholar, who sneaks into the household as a tenant, under an assumed name, to pluck the forbidden fruit. The movie, directed by Julien Landais, can be safely divided in half. Everything that happens outside the main palazzo teeters on the brink of risibility, not least the perspiring

flashbacks to Aspern himself. The scenes involving the Bordereaus, however, are fraught with possessive anxiety; Redgrave, in particular, summons the spirit of James in her character's wrathful defense of a private past.—*Anthony Lane (Reviewed in our issue of 1/14/19.) (In limited release.)*

### Crumb

Terry Zwigoff's beautiful and risky documentary, from 1994, shows how the former underground cartoonist (and occasional *New Yorker* contributor) R. Crumb continued to ply his blasphemous, self-exposing craft long after an idiot smile settled over our official culture. The movie isn't a testimonial or a valentine. It's unpredictable and galvanizing: an empathetic portrait of the artist that also unveils a trenchant view of an American family's dashed illusions. It's also as darkly funny and energetic as any of Crumb's creations. Pacing the film to the languid bounce of the old blues, jazz, and ragtime that sustain Crumb's soul, the filmmaker slowly yet decisively draws the viewer into Crumb's chaotic background. By the end, you're profoundly startled—not only by the psychological wounds of Robert's reclusive older brother, Charles, and his weirdo-ascetic younger brother, Max, but also by how much feeling Zwigoff has obliged you to invest in this clan.—*Michael Sragow (Metrograph, Jan. 19, and streaming.)*

## IN REVIVAL



Film Forum's extensive series "**Far-Out in the 70s: A New Wave of Comedy, 1969-1979**," running Jan. 18-Feb. 14, is aptly anchored by a tribute to Elaine May: no comedy director of the era had a more extravagant imagination, and none paid a higher price for originality. Her first feature, "*A New Leaf*" (pictured above), from 1971, in which she co-stars with Walter Matthau, is an ironically ecstatic romance about a naïve heiress who marries a broke dandy with sordid designs on her money. (The studio drastically shortened it, and May unsuccessfully sued for the release of her cut.) Despite the two Oscar nominations for her next film, "*The Heartbreak Kid*," the studio tried to wrench her third feature, "*Mickey and Nicky*," from her control, and then gave it a scant release. More than a decade passed before May directed another feature, "*Ishtar*," and the malign coverage of its production killed her directorial career. These four films are already classics; the movie ecosystem of her times will be viewed harshly by history for marginalizing her.—*Richard Brody*

### On the Basis of Sex

Felicity Jones stars in this narrowly focussed dramatization, directed by Mimi Leder, of Ruth Bader Ginsburg's rise to prominence. In 1956, Ginsburg enrolls as one of three female students in Harvard Law School, while her husband, Martin (Armie Hammer), is in his second year there. She endures absurd sexist prejudice from her professors (all men), and then, law degree in hand, can't get hired at a New York firm. She becomes a law professor and dreams of arguing a constitutional case to challenge gender discrimination; Martin, a tax lawyer, brings her such a case, on which they successfully collaborate—with her passionate scholarship at the fore. The movie, written by Daniel Stiepleman, sacrifices character for intricate, and often fascinating, legal maneuvers, and emphasizes, above all, the role of social activism—brought home to the Ginsburgs by their teen-age daughter, Jane (Cailee Spaeny)—in judicial change.—*Richard Brody (In wide release.)*

### La Religieuse (The Nun)

A timely return for Jacques Rivette's 1966 film, in a restored print. The movie stirred up controversy on its release (as did Diderot's original novel when it was posthumously published, in 1796), and the story's power to disturb is still alive. Anna Karina plays Suzanne Simonin, who, despite her lack of a spiritual vocation, is obliged by her parents to enter a convent. There she encounters first kindness, then cruelty and abuse, and her efforts to break free meet with only brief success; it is the iron bars of society, we feel, and not just those of the Church, that are caging female lives. One added shock is the sight of Karina—who had been such a bracingly modern heroine in Jean-Luc Godard's "*A Woman Is a Woman*," "*Vivre Sa Vie*," and "*Pierrot le Fou*"—venturing into costume drama and taking the veil. In French.—*A.L. (1/14/19) (In limited release.)*

### Rockaway

Despite its facile framework, John J. Budion's first feature, based on his childhood experiences, is pain-roiled and affecting. It's set in June, 1994, in a Long Island town where two brothers, John (Maxwell Apple), a young primary-schooler and budding artist, and Anthony (Keidrich Sellati), a near-adolescent, are terrified by their brutal father (Wass Stevens). He beats them and their mother (Marjan Neshat), and the boys concoct a reckless plan of vengeance. Meanwhile, the Knicks are in the N.B.A. finals (John is obsessed with the team's unlikely star, John Starks), and the highway chase of O. J. Simpson, which punctuates a game broadcast, figures in the action both dramatically and symbolically. Through sports, the lonely brothers find new and true friends; fantasy sequences suggest John's creative escape into imagination. Though Budion's hearty comedic sketches of rowdy boyhood fall back on New York-neighborhood clichés, he clearly sees the male aggression behind the antic energy. For all its poignant sentiment, the drama, as narrated by the adult John (Frankie J. Alvarez), is ultimately a blankly tragic confrontation with a vortex of doom.—*R.B. (In limited release and video on demand.)*

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## TABLES FOR TWO

### Yummy Tummy

161-16 Northern Blvd., Queens

The first dish I saw upon walking into Yummy Tummy, a new restaurant on Northern Boulevard, in Flushing, was the first dish I ordered. The choice couldn't have been more obvious: there was one on almost every table, a big, round platter of hacked-up blue crabs coated in a thick, pink, chili-flecked sauce and surrounded by a ring of glistening fried buns. I'd never seen it before in New York—except on a movie screen, during a showing of "Crazy Rich Asians," in which the American protagonist is introduced to Singapore with a feast from the food stalls at one of the city's renowned "hawker centers."

Singaporeans are famously food obsessed. They're also incredibly diverse: the population of the island city-state numbered less than a thousand before it was colonized by the British, in 1819 (it gained independence in 1965), and became an international business hub. You might liken "Singaporean cuisine," then, to "New York cuisine," in that it reflects the city's cultural makeup—it's a mosaic of dishes from Malaysia, China,

Indonesia, India, and parts of Europe. At Yummy Tummy, one of the few restaurants in New York that identifies as Singaporean, the chef and owner, Richard Chan, a travel agent turned restaurateur who moved to New York from Singapore thirty-five years ago, serves a selection of his favorites.

Certain dishes are considered particularly representative of the city, and these are what to seek out—and what servers tend to recommend—at Yummy Tummy. Chan's chili crabs are as good as they look, the sauce briny and just a little spicy, the crab meat dark and concentrated in the body, succulent and sweet in the legs, the golden surface of the squishy buns cracking as you bite into them. (Alternatively, you can get the crabs over linguine, which is another way they're served in Singapore. It's also, Chan explained one night, a ploy to pull in local diners in what is a very Korean part of Flushing; "Koreans love noodles," he said, regarding the section of the menu labelled "C'est la vie pasta.")

The Hainanese chicken, which is considered a national dish of Singapore—though it's also very popular in Thailand, where it's known as *khao man gai*—is excellent, too. Poached, skin on, deboned, and sliced neatly, it's served at room temperature on a bed of cucumber, accompanied by dipping sauces and a bowl of warm rice laced with chicken fat.

A crock of *bak kut teh*, which translates from the Hokkien to "meat-bone tea," comprises a dark broth seasoned

with Chinese herbs, tender slow-cooked pork ribs, juicy shiitake caps, and spongy cubes of fried tofu. It's an antidote to winter—as is, of all things, the drinking water. On a chilly night, I was startled to realize, as I took a sip from my glass, that it was hot. The server who had just filled it looked startled, too. "Oh, sorry!" he said, and then shrugged. "Asians like it." In summer, I'd opt for a beer stein of bright-pink *bandung*, evaporated milk mixed with a syrup that's supposedly flavored with rose, but it tastes more like cotton candy on the rocks, speckled with cubes of jelly.

Some parts of the menu feel overextended, as true as they may be to Singapore. It seems like a waste to order something as universally available as salmon in white-wine-butter sauce here. And some of the more familiar Asian offerings, such as the house-fried noodles, described as a "version of the American lo mein Asian style," are as generic as the wall hangings, which say things like "This is our happy place" and "Let's get cozy."

But I'd go back for the crabs alone, and to try Chan's durian cheesecake, which was unfortunately unavailable on two recent visits. In Singapore, durian—a fruit native to Borneo and Sumatra, whose strong odor is extremely divisive—is so popular that it's been banned on public transportation. A cup of Singapore-style hot tea, milky and sweet enough to take the enamel off your teeth, sufficed nicely. (*Entrées \$9-\$30.*)

—Hannah Goldfield

ARCHITECTURAL DIGEST

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## THE TALK OF THE TOWN

### COMMENT ON THE BORDER

President Donald Trump doesn't like to be alone, it seems, at least not during a government-shutdown fight. During the holidays, he complained about having to stay in the White House and work while his wife, Melania, flew to Mar-a-Lago. ("Poor me.") Last Thursday, the twentieth day of the partial shutdown, when he travelled to inspect the border near McAllen, Texas, he brought along the Secretary of Homeland Security, Kirstjen Nielsen; Lieutenant General Todd Semonite, the head of the Army Corps of Engineers (a potential wall-builder); and Sean Hannity, of Fox News. Trump also kept the state's two Republican senators, John Cornyn and Ted Cruz, close at hand. They walked with him along the Rio Grande, as he met with Customs and Border Patrol agents. When the President asked an agent how many Pakistani immigrants his team had apprehended the day before (the answer was two), Cruz and Cornyn leaned in to listen. "I think the Republicans are very happy," Trump told reporters. "I think there's great unity." Cruz, who was sporting a barn jacket and a new beard, nodded vigorously in agreement.

The question of how many real friends the President has among the Senate's Republicans has rarely been more acute. The Senate Majority Leader, Mitch McConnell, has said that he would allow a vote only on funding bills to reopen the government "that the President will sign," knowing that

Trump intends to sign only a bill that will give him more than five billion dollars to build a wall or a "steel barrier." McConnell, along with many other G.O.P. lawmakers, has moved from the role of reluctant supporter to that of active booster. On Tuesday, he dismissed Democratic criticism of the wall—that it is wasteful, demagogic, driven by bigotry, and generally immoral—as "silly." He added that "enforcing our laws wasn't immoral" under other Presidents. Only Trump, he said, had been so maligned. And, after Trump delivered a prime-time address on the shutdown which was riddled with inaccuracies, Senator Lindsey Graham, of South Carolina, said, "This is the most Presidential I've seen President Trump."

There were reports that some Senate Republicans, notably Cory Gardner, of Colorado, Susan Collins, of

Maine, Lisa Murkowski, of Alaska, and Rob Portman, of Ohio, are growing increasingly irritated with Trump's intransigence, not to mention with the lies that he has told to defend his position. That would be understandable, given the disruption that the shutdown has brought to the lives of the eight hundred thousand affected federal workers, and to the people and the country they serve. (The C.B.P. agents who showed Trump around McAllen have been working without pay, as have many of the people involved in getting Air Force One to Texas.) But, when members of the Republican caucus met with Trump at the White House last Wednesday, the opposition was, by most accounts, muted. "I was able to raise the issues that I have with using a shutdown," Murkowski told the *Times*. "He listened and urged that we all stick together."

In McAllen, Trump said he felt that even "very smart" Democrats had realized that his insistence on the wall was a political winner. "It's common sense," he said. Republicans, as he sees it, will triumph at the polls by accusing Democrats of being indifferent to crime in their mad pursuit of open borders. He may be wrong, judging from the midterms. But if he can persuade enough Republicans to adopt that tactic—and many already have—it will both extend the shutdown and make the 2020 election even cruder and dirtier than it is already bound to be.

The Republicans may also be facing a more immediate test. "I have the absolute right to declare a national



emergency," Trump said on the way to McAllen, adding that, if the Democrats didn't give him his wall, "probably I will do it. I would almost say definitely." The consensus among legal scholars is that any President has the power, under the 1976 National Emergencies Act, to take certain limited actions—in particular, the diverting of funds from existing military construction projects—when faced with a national emergency. The problem is that, for the past forty years, it has been left to the President to decide whether a crisis exists and whether the actions that he wants to take will actually help solve it. The law thus may not offer adequate protections against a President who sees not getting his way on a piece of legislation as a national emergency. (The Administration is reportedly considering moving money allocated for disaster relief in Puerto Rico, California, and Texas to a wall slush

fund.) This is a flaw in the emergencies statute, as much as in Trump's character. Congressional Democrats have indicated that, if the President does declare an emergency to build the wall, they will sue him. The humanitarian crisis on the border could become a constitutional one.

Some Republican senators have expressed wariness about such an aggressive extension of executive powers; Marco Rubio, of Florida, warned his colleagues about a future President declaring climate change an emergency. They would do better to contemplate what other emergencies Trump might find if he gets accustomed to invoking them, especially as his own legal problems escalate. As with the shutdown, the Republican senators have the most power to limit Trump and are the least likely to use it. In McAllen, Trump turned to Cruz for affirmation of his broad view of his pow-

ers—and got it, in the form of more enthusiastic nods.

The same afternoon, the White House reportedly scuttled a deal that Senator Graham had been working on, aimed at both giving the President a substantial sum to build a wall and granting Democrats some of the measures that they have fought for on immigration, including protections for the Dreamers. Graham seemed frazzled, telling reporters, "Somebody's got to, like, get some energy to fix this." Soon afterward, he put out a statement suggesting someone who might, instead, break it more. "It is time for President Trump to use emergency powers to fund the construction of a border-wall barrier," he said. "I hope it works." Graham may have walked away from negotiations, but neither he nor his Republican colleagues were leaving the President behind.

—Amy Davidson Sorkin

## LONG, STRANGE TRIP BACK TO START



Earlier this month, Governor Andrew Cuomo stunned North Brooklyn residents by cancelling a long-planned fifteen-month shutdown of the L train, which connects the area to Manhattan. In a call with reporters, he attributed the reversal to an engineering breakthrough, and to the intervention of an unnamed Brooklynite who, the Governor claimed, grabbed him by the lapels during a campaign stop and demanded that Cuomo look him in the eye and tell him that the shutdown was the best plan.

"I'm not an engineer, I don't really know," Cuomo recalled telling the man. "He said, 'But they told you that you couldn't build a new bridge at the Tappan Zee, didn't they?' I said yes. He said, 'But you did it, didn't you?' I said yes. He said, 'Well, did you ever build a bridge before, Governor?' I said no. 'Well, you figured that out, right? And you named the bridge for your father.' I said yes, I was very proud to do that."

Cuomo quickly added, "And nobody heard this but me."

This was mixed news for Hunter Fine and Gil Arevalo, two L-train commuters who have created a board game called *Escape from Hell*—a Candyland-like game that, according to their online description, lets players experience "the hell of trying to get to Manhattan from Williamsburg." In the game, players roll a die and race through Brooklyn using alternative modes of transportation—bus, ferry, bike—while hoping to avoid wild cards that can set them back: bad Uber drivers, empty Citi Bike stations, bus passengers with weirdly long fingernails. First one to Manhattan wins.

A prototype of the game raised more than six thousand dollars on Kickstarter. As of last week, Fine and Arevalo were still planning to mass-produce it, having concluded that, even under Cuomo's new plan—a shutdown-lite, with repairs on nights and weekends—getting to Manhattan will be a hellish experience. "This was always just meant as a social commentary," Arevalo said.

The commentary? "They're fucking up our commutes," Fine said. "That's basically it."

Last Sunday, Fine and Arevalo met at AP Café, in Bushwick—a joint right off the Jefferson Street L stop that serves

oatmeal pancakes—to talk about updates to the game. Both are freelance copywriters for ad agencies. Arevalo, who lives in Bushwick, wore a green flannel shirt and a mesh Patagonia hat; Fine, who lives in Williamsburg, wore a black hoodie and white Jordans. A part-time guerrilla artist, Fine is best known for creating a YouTube game show, "Hikea," in which contestants try to assemble IKEA furniture after taking LSD or psychedelic mushrooms. (In one episode, a wild-eyed man holds up an instruction manual and says, "This is a book of lies!")

They ordered drip coffees and dis-



Hunter Fine and Gil Arevalo

cussed the board game. "Cuomo could be something we play on," Arevalo suggested. They came up with new wild cards: "Cuomo changes mind, the shutdown's back on. Move back two spaces." "Your landlord un-negotiated your lease. Return to start."

The pair then recruited two coffee-shop patrons for a test run of the game—Laura Craig and Wayne Patterson, Australians who moved to Williamsburg last year. Everyone chose a token and started rolling. On the board, Craig, a high-school teacher and nanny, avoided kombucha spills and overcrowded J-M-Z trains, and cruised past House of Yes (a night club) and McCarren Park, for an early lead. The other players stalled. With progress slow, conversation turned to Cuomo.

"I really like him," said Craig, who wore a gray scarf and a beanie. The other players looked surprised. She rolled again, and asked, "Am I thinking of the right Cuomo?"

"You're thinking of Chris Cuomo," Patterson told her. The TV host.

"Oh."

"She loves CNN," Patterson said. On the board, he got stuck behind a group of French tourists on Bedford Avenue. "It's kind of interesting," he said, of the Governor's announcement. "I don't think it's orchestrated. But it is a very good P.R. thing for him—all of a sudden he comes in and saves the day."

More rolls. Arevalo had to move back two spaces when he hopped into a car share near the Williamsburg strip club Pumps only to find his ex in the back seat. Fine was blocked by a Bushwick graffiti tour. Ten minutes passed, then twenty. Time slowed to a crawl, as if measured by a subway countdown clock. The players began to feel loopy. "Whoa, I swear I just had *déjà vu*," Craig said.

"I think we can end it pretty soon," Fine said.

When the game was called, Arevalo was back in his apartment and Patterson and Fine were stopped near Peter Luger Steak House. Craig, the winner, had made it all the way to the Flyrite Tattoo parlor, near the Metropolitan Avenue station on the G train. No one had reached Manhattan. Fine admitted that the game is almost impossible to conquer: "That's kind of the joke."

—Zach Helfand

## INK GOING GREEN



The first biannual Cannabis Media Summit took place a few weeks ago, hosted by Duane Morris, a law firm with a cannabis practice. Tickets cost a hundred and forty-nine dollars; the proceedings started at 9 A.M. in the firm's midtown offices, which smelled not faintly of the subject. More than a hundred paying attendees turned out to hear journalists from outlets including *DOPE* ("Defending Our Plant Everywhere"), *Mary* ("the mature voice of cannabis culture"), *High Times*, and the Boston *Globe* speak on panels with titles like "Getting the Scoop" and "The Rise of Marijuana Podcasting."

New York could become the eleventh state to legalize recreational marijuana, and attendees were optimistic. On a panel called "Financial Reporting on Publicly Traded Cannabis Stocks," Bill Alpert, a writer for *Barron's*, told the crowd, "It's great fun to tour the grow houses. To put on the surgical masks and the shoe coverings." He added, "Because I only ever used to see grow houses in indictments." Nina Fern, a former currency broker who founded *The Highly*, which she describes as "a Michelin guide for the cannabis industry," ended one conversation by offering a cannabis-infused mint.

The *National Law Journal* recently put out a list of cannabis-law trailblazers, which included David Feldman, a partner at Duane Morris, who moderated a panel called "Ethics in Cannabis Reporting." Feldman tried warming up the crowd with a few jokes. Why did the pothead plant Cheerios? "Because he thought they were doughnut seeds!" Feldman said, to scattered laughs. He tried again: How do you get a one-armed stoner out of a tree? "Wave!" Feldman said. "These are not going over well."

The panel featured three female freelance journalists. A young woman in the audience raised her hand. "I'm a reporter who's been at mainstream outlets for seven years," she said. "I've covered government, politics, and criminal justice. Now I'm going to be covering the can-

nabis beat." Her question: "I'm just curious if you guys smoke weed with your sources. When you're meeting them and they're, like, 'Do you wanna hit this?'"

Feldman interrupted, telling the panelists, "As your lawyer, I advise you not to answer that question."

Sara Brittany Somerset, who writes for *Forbes*, was circumspect. "I have qualms about mainstream writers who are getting into cannabis lying to their sources and pretending that they use cannabis to be ingratiating," she said.

Janet Burns, who writes for *Leafly* and hosts a podcast called "The Toke," was more direct. "I'm down," she said. "I'm not proposing there should be a budget for that, but—"

"A new journalism line item!" Feldman said.

Burns went on, "I definitely don't think it should be compulsory in this field."

Stu Zakim, the owner of a cannabis communications firm, asked for advice on changing "the way people refer to cannabis." He added, "We need to eradicate the stigma."

"We have a style guide," Sirita Wright, a co-founder of a female-oriented site called *EstroHaze*, said. "In a perfect world, there'd be a task force diligently working on some A.P. standards." She expressed sympathy for people who assume it's called "weed." "I get it. I used to call it that, too."

Adrian Farquharson, the chief creative officer at *Mary*, weighed in. "It's *Cannabis sativa*," he said. "It's not 'pot,' it's not 'weed.' Call it by the plant's name!" People clapped.

During the next panel, Dan Adams, from the *Globe*, grumbled, "I'm in a never-ending war with our copy desk to stop putting punny headlines on my stories."

Attendees discussed preferred modes of consumption. Zakim said that he tends to use "flower"—the plant's smokable buds—or "vaping if I have no choice." Jyl Ferris, a cannabis marketer, described herself as "an indica-flower person, because I like the whole-body feeling." Taylor West, a consultant, said she uses "a gummy at night, to help me fall back asleep."

In a conference room, a group of industry representatives traded notes on best practices for vaping on airplanes. "You

don't have to necessarily worry too much about the smell," advised one, a bearded young man who works for a company that makes cannabis-infused sublingual strips. He went on, "The visibility area from the flight crew is the seat tops and above. I usually exhale while I'm pretending to get something out of my bag down here"—he gestured to his feet—"because it gives you an extra foot or two of dissipation before it reaches above the seats."

Several people nodded.

The bearded man pointed to a co-worker. "He likes to use his drink," he said. "And make it play off the ice cubes."

The proceedings concluded around 5 P.M. Outside, it was hard to hail a cab. Walking felt nice.

—Charles Bethea

## ASSEMBLAGE DEPT. BITS AND BOBS



The other day, in Times Square, the artist Yuji Agematsu took a notebook and a pen from his pants pocket. He logged the time, 12:34 P.M., and the precise location, the south side of Forty-second Street between Broadway and Seventh Avenue, and drew a rough map. Then something caught his eye. "That spot," he said, pointing to the ground beside a trash can several feet away. He crossed the sidewalk and picked up a tiny whitish object, which resembled a used eraser. "Gum," he declared approvingly. He dropped the wad into a cellophane sleeve he'd removed from a pack of American Spirit cigarettes, then carefully slid the sleeve into the empty cigarette box, and returned the package to his shirt pocket for safekeeping.

Shortly after Agematsu, who is sixty-two, moved to New York from Japan, in 1980, he began taking daily exploratory walks, picking up debris along the way to use in assemblage-style sculptures. In 1996, he decided to incorporate his pack-a-day habit into a new project, making a composition inside a cellophane sleeve on each expedition, a practice that has resulted in thousands of diminutive sculptures that are diaristic records of his and

the city's lives. All three hundred and sixty-five days' worth of his 2017 "zips," as he calls them, are on view at the fifty-seventh edition of the Carnegie International, in Pittsburgh, through March 25th. Ingrid Schaffner, the show's curator, called the works "a daily art practice, personal ritual, and way of marking time on earth." (They sell in monthly sets for around twenty thousand dollars.)

Crossing Broadway, Agematsu, who has floppy black hair, a graying beard, and glasses, noticed flakes of bright-green color scattered around a small puddle. He bent low and scraped them up: crayon. He added them to the wrapper in his pocket and logged the location in his notebook, which he considers part of the art project. He wrote in minuscule handwriting in a combination of English and Japanese. Continuing north, he said, "I'm not looking at the ground much—I just go straight. Objects are always looking at me."

Over the years, Agematsu has developed favorite neighborhoods for scavenging: Times Square, Herald Square, Chinatown. He described subway stations, gutters, and the sidewalk under traffic signals or scaffolding as places where people toss with impunity. Desirable debris—he prefers not to call it garbage—also collects at the edges of buildings, such as next to Nasdaq's tower, on Broadway, where he found some strands of plastic turf tangled amid a mass of hair and a hunk of what can only be described as filth. At a newsstand outside a nearby Starbucks, he



Yuji Agematsu

scored an M&M, its dye dissolved from the morning rain and half its shell missing. Back in his studio, he secures the items in place inside the cellophane with drops of resin.

Until this past summer, Agematsu, who lives with his wife in Crown Heights, had always supported himself with a day job. He has worked as an art handler and a cleaner at galleries, and he took care of a building in SoHo owned by the Donald Judd Foundation. Recent success has allowed him to be a full-time artist. Earlier in the week, he'd explored Vinegar Hill, in Brooklyn, where he was pleased to collect a dead cicada, and the South Bronx, which, he said, "feels like the early eighties." The East Village has lost its appeal. "It's drastically changed. Looks ugly." Still, he said, shiny new condos do not deter gum-spitters. "People's behavior never changes," he said. "This is a consumer society."

Agematsu strode along the sidewalk at a fast clip. He ignored a soda-bottle cap and a Swedish Fish wrapper. "It's too easy to identify," he said. "I'm interested in anonymous things." Passersby turned their heads when he stooped to scoop up a congealing red gummy, but they did not stop. Only cops have ever approached him, he said: "They asked me very stupid questions—'What are you doing? This is art?'"

It had started to rain—drops smeared the ink in Agematsu's notebook, but he just brushed them away. Rain is helpful. "It breaks things down and makes them sticky," he said; they become more unrecognizable. "I like wondering what it used to be." Outside an Old Navy, he spotted a skinny Club cigarette with a blue stripe. "I've never seen one like this," he said excitedly. He slid it into the corner of the cellophane. Soon after, he stuck wads of gum onto the cigarette, using a cocktail skewer that he'd brought along as a tool.

At Forty-sixth Street, Agematsu held up the day's "zip." It looked a little like a demented bonsai tree. He adjusted a crumpled Hershey's Kiss foil dangling from the top of the cellophane like a disco ball, then straightened a long pink object of indeterminate origin. "I think that's it for today," he said. "I like it." He noted the time, 1:28 P.M., and lit a cigarette.

—Julie Belcove

**POSTAL DEPT.**  
**HEARTFELT**


Not long ago, Amy Cunningham, a funeral director for Brooklyn's Green-Wood Cemetery, convened about twenty strangers in a third-floor room at the Sixty-seventh Street library in Manhattan, for a workshop on writing condolence letters. (The event was part of a festival called "Reimagine End of Life.") "I have a confession to make at the outset," Cunningham told the crowd, a group of women of diverse ages and scarf preferences. "Though I have studied condolence letters and thought a lot about this, I struggle to sit down and write a letter myself." For many of us, she said, the problem is ambition. "I think we want it to be too good and too all-encompassing." As a result, some people fail to write anything at all. Or they procrastinate. "I even find myself saying, 'Oh, I don't have the right stationery at my desk at this moment,' or 'Where are my stamps?'"

Cunningham, who has soft blond bangs that frame her face, pulled up a PowerPoint presentation and clicked through some tips. "Passed away" is out; "died" is in. Don't say, "I know how you feel" or "This is God's plan." Handwritten letters are always good, but you can also type something and print it on ivory paper. "I'm not opposed to preprinted cards," Cunningham said.

To illustrate her points, she shared a few condolence letters from famous literary and historical figures. "This is not a good letter, Charlie," Ernest Hemingway wrote to Charles Scribner, the son of his late publisher. "But I still feel too sad to write a good one." Cunningham awarded him points for completion. "Aiming for excellence is really only going to hold you up."

Writing to a friend's widow, Aldous Huxley veered into esoteric musings: "How are we related to what we were? Who are we now and what were we then? . . . There are no answers, of course." According to Cunningham, this was not "a home run," although it might have been endearing to a friend of Huxley's.

Next came a lesson in tone. Nancy



*"Which way is Lex?"*

Mitford once ended a letter to her cousin, whose husband had just died, on an oddly chipper note: "It's nice that Decca is coming over for a long visit. Why don't you come to Versailles with her—I would put her in a hotel and you could stay with me. Think of it."

"This is not a success, O.K.?" Cunningham said.

Also, don't make it about yourself, as Queen Victoria did in a letter to Mary Todd Lincoln after the death of the President: "No one can better appreciate than I can, who am myself utterly broken-hearted by the loss of my own beloved husband, who was the light of my life, my stay, my all, what your sufferings must be."

"Maybe if you're the Queen of England you can break the rules," Cunningham said, shrugging.

For inspiration, she shared the work of two overachievers. Emily Dickinson sent mourners a sequence of condolence letters, to reach them during different stages of grief, and enclosed flowers from her garden. Marcel Proust, Cunningham said, was often in "such a state of ecstatic relatedness to grief, loss, and remembrance" that he could go on for pages about people he'd never met.

Next, Cunningham produced her

secret weapon: a Victorian-inspired condolence "tool kit" that she'd made from an old wooden box, decorated with découpaged butterflies. She opened its lid and pointed out various compartments, for stamps and envelopes. "If you really want to go nuts, there's sealing wax in here and a little candle to calm yourself."

It was time for an audience Q. & A. One woman mentioned the cards she'd received from her late mother's neighbors: "It meant a ton to just be acknowledged."

The discussion turned to fraught family dynamics. Cunningham talked about her own struggles after the death of her mother, with whom she'd had a complicated relationship. "Yeah, what do you say when it's kind of 'Sorry, not sorry?'" another woman asked. Cunningham advised restraint.

Finally, Cunningham passed around a wicker basket filled with white sachets, each containing two stamps printed with the word "LOVE" in swirly letters. They were the beginnings of a tool kit. "It's nice to have everything all set to go and no excuses," she said. "You know where your condolence gear is, and you're ready to take action."

—Mallory Rice

ONWARD AND UPWARD WITH THE ARTS

## AMERICAN GRAPHIC

*Panel by panel, Nick Drnaso chronicles dark realities of modern life.*

BY D. T. MAX

*Drnaso, drawn by Chris Ware, a friend of his from Chicago's cartooning scene.*

This past September, at the Brooklyn Book Festival, the graphic novelist Nick Drnaso signed books at the kiosk of his publisher, Drawn & Quarterly. The kiosk's vertical supports, its horizontal banner, and the table where he was sitting formed a squat rectangular panel, with his upper body at its center. Drnaso (pronounced "dur-nass-oh") has small dark eyes, a wan complexion, and a narrow black mustache that seems to have been sketched in by a fine-nibbed pen. He was wearing a black shirt. His hair, which is thinning, was hidden beneath a black baseball cap.

Drnaso, who is twenty-nine, was promoting "Sabrina," his graphic novel about a young man in Chicago who is devastated by his girlfriend's sudden disap-

pearance. Did Sabrina just leave him, or was she kidnapped or murdered? He flees the mystery, and the attendant media frenzy, seeking refuge with an old buddy in Colorado Springs. Strangers learn of awful news before he does. The Internet first denies him the privacy of his grief, and then, when the fringe weighs in, upends his certainty about Sabrina's fate. "Sabrina" depicts an eerie world of orderly tract homes, tidy parking lots, and empty streets, where roiling emotions have been displaced onto computer screens, and where powerful people make reckless pronouncements based on bottomless skepticism.

Drnaso, who lives in Chicago, has spent many hours in the darker corners of the Internet. "I have a morbid curios-

ity in me," he said. But "Sabrina" is not autobiographical. He told me that he had followed the advice that the celebrated graphic novelist Chris Ware once gave to aspiring cartoonists: throw out your yearbooks. "They are not reference material," Ware warned. The breadth of vision displayed in "Sabrina" impressed Zadie Smith, who had started reading Drnaso on Ware's recommendation. She has called it "the best book—in any medium—I have read about our current moment." "Sabrina" is the intimate story of one man's suffering, but it also captures the political nihilism of the social-media era—a time when a President can dismiss the murder of a journalist by saying of the perpetrator, "Maybe he did. Maybe he didn't."

When I arrived at the book fair, Drnaso was chatting with an older man who had just bought all the remaining copies of "Sabrina" at the kiosk. The book, which in July became the first graphic novel to be long-listed for the Man Booker Prize, had been sold out in bookstores for months, and the copies available at the festival had come directly from Drawn & Quarterly's main office, in Montreal. The man had piled his trove into a photocopy-paper box lashed to a hand trolley with a bungee cord; though he almost certainly planned to resell the books, he kept assuring Drnaso, "They're for friends." Drnaso, with an unreadable smile, said that he believed him. He signed each one with a spare portrait of one of the book's characters.

Drnaso is as composed as his panels, which are rendered in crisp, almost rigid lines. He had only complimentary things to tell me about other cartoonists, and insisted that he wasn't bothered by the fact that Drawn & Quarterly, which specializes in indie comics, had greatly underestimated the demand for "Sabrina." "I don't care in the least," he said. "I never thought there was some sales goal I needed to hit." He is so modest that, at one point, he offered an apology for his modesty, observing that "self-deprecation can be a little bit overbearing on the person who is forced to listen to it." The only time I saw him express an impolite emotion was a few weeks after the book fair, when we were in a minor car accident on Milwaukee Avenue, in Chicago. He was taking me on a tour of Logan Square, a fast-gentrifying neighborhood

about which he has “mixed feelings.” It is not far from where he lives with his wife, Sarah, and their three cats. We had just eaten a meat-heavy breakfast at a favored diner—“It does the job,” he commented—when a minivan rear-ended us. Drnaso’s car had barely budged, but he was clearly upset. “What the fuck was that?” he said.

Within seconds, though, his emotions had been contained, and he assured the other driver that he would not contact his insurer. “People have let me slide once or twice, and you’re always grateful,” Drnaso explained, as we headed off. “No one wants to deal with insurance.” He noted that, after a fender bender, “usually I end up being the one to apologize—I’m sorry my car got in the way of your cell-phone use.” Drnaso’s unfailing courtesy, with its suggestion of a current of hidden anger, finds a visual correlate in his work. He draws his characters in a way that initially suggests minimal emotion: their eyes are dots, their mouths small semicircles. But this aesthetic makes it all the more wrenching when the reader detects a flicker of anguish on one of the placid faces.

Drnaso grew up in Palos Hills, a suburb southwest of Chicago. He went to the local grade school and high school, and disliked them both. When he was around ten, a teen-age boy, a neighbor, sexually molested him multiple times. Ashamed, Drnaso told no one. He had never been an extrovert, but after the assaults he grew withdrawn and depressed. He could never predict when something would revive his memory of the trauma. One day, in a high-school health class, he watched a video on sexually transmitted diseases, and he became fixated on the idea that he had been infected by his abuser. “It was the typical process of blaming yourself,” he told me. “At that point, I hadn’t so much as kissed someone.”

Drnaso remembers this as a time when he mostly tuned others out. He listened to music all day long, with a preference for the indie-folk songwriter Will Oldham, and sometimes even went to sleep with his headphones on. He gave pot and alcohol a try, but neither eased his anxiety. “I discovered cigarettes when I was seventeen,” he said. “That was a great relief.” (For a few years, at least, until he

became “terrified of the health effects” and quit.) His older brother was into heavy-metal music, and Drnaso began to join him at concerts and record stores, developing a love for splenetic bands like Acid Bath and Agoraphobic Nosebleed.

Drnaso began drawing, inspired, in part, by the phantasmagoric album covers of the heavy-metal bands he liked. A close friend was also into cartooning, and he tended to draw comedic panels; Drnaso gravitated toward much bleaker stories, tales of high school as a crucible of humiliation and failure. They bore the mark of Todd Solondz, the director of “Welcome to the Dollhouse,” an abject coming-of-age comedy that Drnaso admired, and of R. Crumb, the counterculture cartoonist. Drnaso assimilated both Crumb’s uncorked adolescent anger and the heavy cross-hatching that expressed it. Drnaso told me that he regrets this early work, which he considers facile in its darkness. When I asked to see some of the drawings, he said that he had destroyed them all. He startled me with the intensity of his renunciation: “I hate the person I was then.”

Drnaso told me that, during his adolescence, he spent a lot of time reading about “serial killers and mass murders and Chernobyl and other forms of gruesome terror.” When his family got Internet access, he looked at many things that he shouldn’t have. “There would be a beheading video, and I kind of couldn’t help myself and would be compelled to watch, and then I’d condemn myself,” he said. He understands why so many people click on such material, though: “It sounds really sick, but a lot of times you’d just end up in tears, but you’d feel something visceral. The *feeling* is something.”

After graduating, Drnaso spent two years at a local community college; then, in the fall of 2009, he transferred to Columbia College, in downtown Chicago, to study illustration. He was already interested in making book-length cartoons; he liked storytelling and the solitude that long-form work offered. A drawing-class professor showed some of Drnaso’s cartoons to the illustrator Ivan Brunetti, who also taught in the department. Brunetti told me that the cartoons were “just beautifully drawn,” and reminded him of “the early-seventies work of Bill Griffith,” who is best known

as the creator of the irrepressible and irreverent character Zippy the Pinhead. Brunetti particularly admired a thirty-six-page cartoon that presented a perverse backstory to “It’s a Wonderful Life.” Drnaso’s retelling focussed on the boy George Bailey sweeps Mary away from at the Bedford Falls High School dance. The jilted classmate tries to poison Bailey, then commits suicide. Brunetti sent the story to the underground cartoonist Kim Deitch, who wrote a letter to Drnaso that praised his drawing and his ambition, and also admonished, “You have to find something more interesting, storywise, to do.”

Drnaso was not offended. He already had grown to dislike his parody, along with what he calls “even worse stuff.” When I asked him to name the most objectionable thing he’d drawn, he described a cartoon that he’d created when he was eighteen: “The whole strip is this young man speaking to the reader about how he’s lovelorn and this sensitive guy, and how he has this great new relationship. And then the clever reveal—‘clever,’ in huge quotes—is that it’s this kidnapped woman. He’s tied up a girl and left her in a closet.”

In 2011, Drnaso took a class taught by Brunetti. When Brunetti asked his students to draw someone they remembered from childhood, Drnaso surprised himself by attempting to capture, in ink on paper, his assailant, and what he had done to him a decade earlier. “I tried to make the drawings kind of cute,” he recalled. “Even the guy at the center of the story is this kid with a goofy smile and braces.” The details of the abuse were not depicted; Drnaso showed only a closed bathroom door. At the time of the assignment, his attacker had just been arrested for soliciting sex from underage girls on Facebook, and the final panel was a drawing of the man’s mug shot. (The man later pleaded guilty to one count and spent three years in prison.) Drnaso gave a photocopy of the cartoon to Brunetti, and asked him to destroy it after reading. Brunetti, stunned by its content, quietly disobeyed, folding it up and storing it someplace secret. (He still has it.)

At one point, Brunetti, hoping that the shy Drnaso would feel emboldened by seeing his work in print, invited him to contribute to a student anthology. In

response, his student drew a twelve-panel comic, in his then frenetic counterculture style, about a businessman who barely catches a flight, only to die a few panels later, when the plane crashes. But as he worked on the project he realized that there was something else he needed to draw. Earlier that week, he had been taking a cigarette break outside the school, and had failed to help a fellow-student whose wheelchair was rolling off the sidewalk and into a busy street. "I just froze," he recalled to me. A parking-garage attendant nearby rescued the girl. To commemorate what Drnaso calls the "shitty thing I did," without giving away that the cartoon was about him, he improvised a new visual language. He cut out from a magazine banal images, some of them depicting kindhearted acts—a man opening a bus door for a woman, Mickey Mouse sharing a meal with Minnie Mouse on an airplane—traced them, colored them in, and accompanied them with a regret-filled monologue. He was pleased with the result: he had found a way to express his hot shame beneath a chilly veneer. He told me, "That just kind of changed what I thought about what I wanted to do."

By the end of college, Drnaso knew that he wanted to record the world around him, rather than satirize it. Brunetti encouraged the shift. "I remember telling him he was funnier when he *wasn't* funny," he said. Drnaso was also finding inspiration in the work of other cartoonists, among them Julie Doucet, the Canadian graphic artist, whose deftly drawn autobiographical stories showed Drnaso that even dislikable people are, as he put it to me, "worthy of some dignity." Although Drnaso was consumed by drawing, he told me that he did not particularly hope to become a full-time cartoonist, noting, "Having a hump job during the day and having this private thing at night was kind of a life style I could live with." One of his role models was Henry Darger, the Chicago outsider artist, who worked as a janitor for most of his life and never tried to present his work to the public. Darger's "In the Realms of the Unreal," a fifteen-thousand-page work that ravishingly, and disturbingly, depicts erotic fantasies about girls, was discovered by his landlord after his death.

Most young cartoonists focus on either the far away (fantasy) or the immediately at hand (memoir). Drnaso was unusual in being attracted to the subject of the traditional realist novel: imaginary people experiencing the small conflicts and successes of ordinary life. He was also deeply interested in the working-class and middle-income world he came from. His father, who is retired, worked for a cable-TV company; his mother is a teacher's aide; his brother works in a warehouse, and sometimes drives for Uber. Drnaso has held jobs ever since he was a teen-ager, and finds stability and gratification in manual labor. He told me that, in 2012, soon after graduating from college, he was asked to paint a mural for an art opening in Chicago. That month, as a member of a maintenance crew at a local concert arena, he was also staining a fence. He finished the two jobs on the same day, he told me, recalling, "The feeling of satisfaction was exactly the same between when I looked at the finished fence and when I looked at the mural."

Few of Drnaso's hump jobs have paid well, and he has often lived paycheck to paycheck. One reason he wasn't angrier when we were rear-ended was that he'd bought his car, a used Nissan Versa, with money from an insurance settlement: a driver had hit him while he was biking. The impact sent him to the emergency room in an ambulance, with a broken clavicle, but the upshot was that he got a car he could not otherwise have afforded. "So all things considered it was a good experience," he told me.

While working on the arena maintenance crew, Drnaso told me, he found his attention drawn to an "oddball" co-worker, and wrote a story, "The Grassy Knoll," about a young man on a maintenance team who ostracizes a colleague with a creepy grin. The story seems to capture Drnaso's lingering sense of distrust: how could you tell if someone was just peculiar or a potential predator? The story never resolves whether the rejection is deserved.

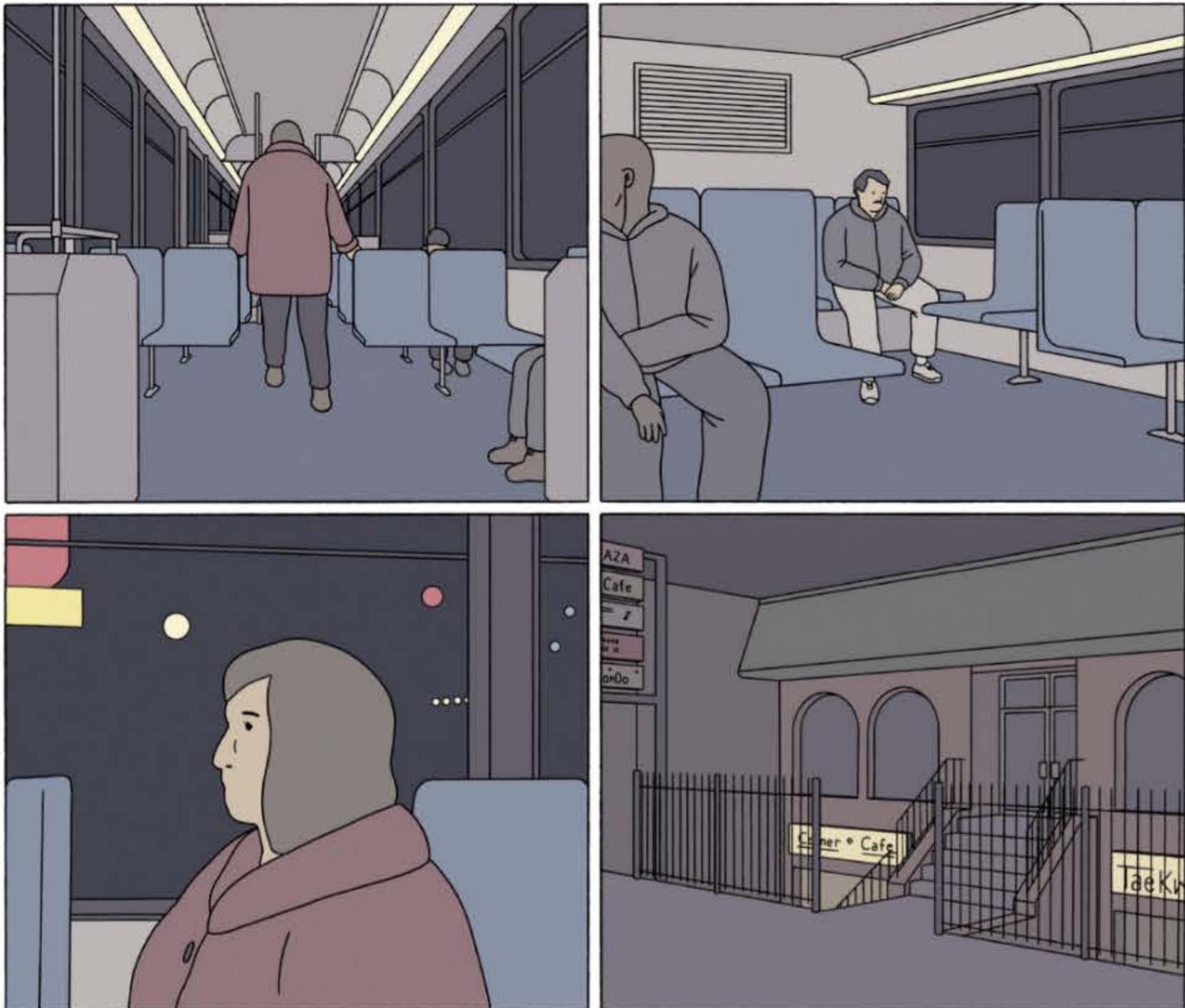
Five other stories of shame and frustration followed, and in 2016 Drnaso published them in his first book, "Beverly." In another story, "Pudding," a girl tries to get a female friend to acknowledge a past moment of sexual intimacy between them, but the friend angrily

denies the experience. "The Lil' King" is the story of a middle-aged couple on vacation with their teen-age daughter, Cara, and their silent son, Tyler, who is a tangle of longing and anger. Nothing dramatic happens to the boy, but Drnaso interweaves the ordinary details of a family trip with half a dozen panels in which Tyler fantasizes scenes of brutal revenge and outlandish orgies. Drnaso told me that he was proud of the technical achievement of "The Lil' King," explaining, "I read too many online comments, and stuff where people say, 'Why did this have to be a comic book?' With that story, I remember feeling like I had married words with pictures in a way I wasn't able to do before."

"Beverly" can be completed in half an hour, but it rewards more careful reading. The stories are delicately tethered to one another, in the manner of Jennifer Egan's "A Visit from the Goon Squad": a character in one story appears, a decade older, in another story. After the gay young woman in "Pudding" has her unhappy encounter with her friend, she comes across a terrible car crash; one of the victims has a role in "The Lil' King." Chris Ware, whom Brunetti introduced to Drnaso's work, has described "Beverly" as "chilled-windowpane views into the fogged American psyche." The *Los Angeles Times* named it the best graphic novel or comic of 2016.

Soon after high school, Drnaso had had a serious girlfriend, but after they broke up he avoided anything that might lead to rejection or a date. "I sequestered myself," he told me. "I was just very numb." In 2012, he left his concert-arena job to work as a janitor at the Whole Foods in Lincoln Park. One day, a young woman who cut the store's fresh flowers, Sarah Leitten, spotted him reading "Alias the Cat," a graphic novel by Kim Deitch. Drnaso, in turn, noticed that Leitten was reading John Porcellino's "Perfect Example," which chronicles the cartoonist's final discontent summer in a suburban Illinois town. They began to chat, and Leitten noted that she liked to draw.

She asked him to go to the movies, and they went to see "Cremaster 3," a queasy three-hour art film by Matthew Barney. They also exchanged their own comics. Leitten, who had trained at the



*The drab tonalities and the deliberate slowness of "Sabrina" challenge a genre that leans toward the overheated.*

Cleveland Institute of Art, gave him a zine, "Discovery Tales," which included "Custard's Last Sit," a one-panel gag depicting an ice-cream cone, on a chair, melting in the sun. It was an example of the "dumb stoner humor" that she enjoyed. His gift was eight pages long and included a twelve-panel comic called "Ax to Grind," about a spooky co-worker. Leitten told me that, until then, she had gone out only with musicians, "mostly all assholes," and was immediately taken with Drnaso's thoughtful reserve. Drnaso was excited to meet someone so cheerful and candid. She soon told him that she had been abused as a child, but he did not reveal what had happened to him. Soon, they were seriously dating.

The relationship brought Drnaso joy but also worry. He spent his days drawing in his apartment office—a bedroom

closet—and he'd become dependent on knowing that he'd see Leitten when he was done. He remembers feeling that his reliance on her had become "cowardly." And what if disaster struck? How would he manage without her? "There was just this black cloud that hung over it—that something terrible could happen," he told me. Partly in an effort to sublimate these fears, he began working on a story about a young man whose girlfriend, named Sabrina, vanishes while walking home from work.

Two of the first panels he drew were of the young man, Teddy, in closeup. Teddy was being driven by his friend Calvin, a cybersecurity specialist in the Air Force, to Calvin's home, in Colorado Springs. Teddy's eyes were slits of pain, and his heavily furrowed brow further telegraphed his agony. Drnaso wasn't

happy with the drawing. "I was obviously trying to leap into the heartache on page 1," he told me. "It just looked forced and melodramatic." He moved the panel to later in the book and streamlined the figures' expressions. "Adding more detail to make someone seem more human isn't necessarily effective," he said. Teddy's nose became a line, his eyes dots. Worry was now an affectless despair. Drnaso also severely restricted his color palette. Some panels in "Beverly" evoked David Hockney; now every hue was dull. The blue sky that originally accompanied Teddy and Calvin on their drive through Colorado Springs became the toxic yellow of a washed-out sunset. The only characters who had vivid features were those shown in news clips or online, as if people came to life only onscreen. Drnaso even subjected his

backdrops to this ethic of subtraction: "If there is a gas station in a comic, usually you see four cars. In 'Sabrina,' there are no cars."

Drnaso wasn't certain where "Sabrina" would end, but he completed two to three pages a week—a good clip for him. He felt excited by his visual choices. He loved populating the book with men in camouflage—"little green Army men," he calls them—because their uniforms stood out against the drab background of the air base where Calvin works. "I liked the contrast of the white austere office building and their wearing these fatigues that you associate with heroism and combat," he told me. He based his drawings of Calvin's house—nondescript furniture, dunes of laundry—on photographs he had taken while visiting the house of a friend who works at Peterson Air Force Base, in Colorado Springs. Drnaso had to imagine the inside of the air base, because he wasn't allowed to visit. He is obsessed with getting visual details right, and he was disappointed, after publication, when his friend told him that no self-respecting airman would have a tattoo with

his branch's insignia, as Calvin has in the book.

Because Drnaso avoids visual clutter in "Sabrina," any object that he includes feels freighted with import. An attuned reader will notice that, in a corridor at the base where Calvin has a confrontation with a scheming colleague, there is a tiny gray square where a wall meets the ceiling. "That's the one place where the security cameras are pronounced," Drnaso told me. "It's a suggestion that they're not the only two people in that corridor."

In 2014, Drnaso had watched videos that Elliot Rodger had recorded before going on a shooting rampage at the University of California, Santa Barbara. Drnaso told me, "I guess you can't really blame people's curiosity in wanting to understand the life of the person who committed the heinous act more than the people who happened to just fall victim." That tension felt unique to this moment in history, and gave him another idea for his story. He decided that Sabrina would be murdered by someone like Rodger: a men's-rights activist and a misogynist.

Drnaso had also followed the Sandy

Hook massacre and the appalling conspiracy theories it had spawned—in particular, the idea that the shooting was a fake event concocted by gun-control activists. In the book, the pain felt by Teddy and by Sabrina's family gets repeatedly lanced by strangers online who refuse to acknowledge that her killing really happened. As part of Drnaso's research for "Sabrina," he listened to podcasts of "Infowars," the extremist radio show hosted by Alex Jones. The words of Jones and his guests were repellent, but they told a story, and he could imagine how even their distorted world views could provide listeners with a perverse consolation. In one of the more arresting turns in "Sabrina," Teddy wanders around Calvin's house, looking for a way to kill himself, and comes across a radio; he begins listening to an "Infowars"-style broadcast. He is strangely comforted by the host's heartless speculation about Sabrina's death—it mirrors his own numbness.

Drnaso finished his draft in the spring of 2017. He had created a comic whose drab tonalities and deliberate slowness challenged a genre that leans toward the overheated. Reading "Sabrina" feels almost like an antidote to the hectic Web sites its characters are so immersed in: some pages are simply panels of a character getting wordlessly into his car and going from one undistinguished place to another. Most of the panels have only one character in them, and are subtle in their virtuosity. One scene is presented from the point of view of laptop cameras, as Calvin and his daughter, who is in Florida, have a video chat. Calvin's unspoken hope for connection is expressed by the way he grows larger from one panel to the next—he is leaning into his screen. When his daughter loses interest and walks away, Calvin sits back, and looks literally deflated. Effects like these impressed Drnaso's fellow-cartoonists. Roz Chast told me that he "gets across a mood that's very unsettling, in a way that I've never quite come across before, at least in graphic novels."

Like the best fiction, "Sabrina" makes you do the work of understanding the story. Sometimes it takes several pages before you apprehend how a new section fits with those which came before. It never condescends to its characters—



"Oh, God, it's Alvin and Meg—pretend we don't notice them."

to their unfashionable haircuts, soft bodies, and modest ambitions. When Calvin praises a microbrew for its “cool packaging” or suggests to his devastated friend that he might consider a law-enforcement career, as a way to turn “grief into something positive,” the tone is sincere.

Drnaso was ready to send the completed “Sabrina” to Drawn & Quarterly. But he suddenly became overwhelmed by the thought that the story was irredeemably lurid. He had recently come back from a writing retreat—his first time without Sarah in more than three years—and felt destabilized. Donald Trump had just taken office, and the grotesque elements of “Sabrina” felt different. Drnaso told me, “I began to think that there was no point in putting something like this out in a world that’s drowning in negative subject matter.”

He had depicted the murder as a four-page sequence. In the first three pages, the men’s-rights activist rants about how society has wronged him. On the fourth page, the man methodically stabs Sabrina to death, with a detachment consistent with the rest of the book. Drnaso had been able to draw Sabrina’s murder only after getting drunk. He wondered if reading these pages would be any different from going online and watching an ISIS murder video or, as he had once done, looking at forensic photographs of Jeffrey Dahmer’s apartment. As a teen-ager, he had watched “Faces of Death”—a video compilation of beheadings and electrocutions—at a friend’s house, and he had never forgotten it. Now, with “Sabrina,” he concluded that he had created a poisonous book out of our poisoned times. “It’s not going to be healthy for anyone to read this,” he told himself. He e-mailed his editor and said that he did not want “Sabrina” to be read by the public.

“I made the decision not to publish,” Drnaso remembers. “And then really sunk.” He stopped drawing. He resumed smoking. His domestic happiness felt false. He said, “I had this thought that Sarah would do better without me, that I was not going to be a good presence in her life, and that I should probably just make a clean break.”

During this period, his memories of being molested came flooding back, overwhelming him. The fact that his



*“I’ve compiled a list of fitness-obsessed celebrities who died of natural causes at the age you are now.”*

parents had been kind and nurturing made it somehow harder to face the truth—he didn’t want his childhood to be defined by abuse. He contemplated suicide. “It was just me wanting to unplug,” he recalled. “As if I could cryogenically freeze my body for a few years and block it all out.” Leitten was patient with him. “I was dealing with so much self-loathing,” Drnaso recalled. “I didn’t *want* to be the wounded animal. I just sat there and ruminated for eighteen hours a day, and she just waited it out.” Leitten sat with him on the couch and comforted and hugged him. “I would just sit quietly and be present with him,” she said. “There was a lot of that.”

Drnaso’s internist sent him to an in-patient facility, but when he got there he refused to go in. Finally, he went to a therapist. He had no health insurance, and so after his Medicaid ran out she gave him a discounted rate. He started taking the antidepressant citalopram, and began to feel more stable. Drnaso finally told Sarah and his parents about the abuse. They were all supportive.

His crisis lasted more than a month. During that time, he saw the isolation and the shame of his characters in a more autobiographical light. Tyler, the boy in “The Lil’ King,” with his rage

and self-doubt, now reminded him of his younger self. Drnaso revisited “Sabrina,” and decided that he could publish the book after all, if he removed the murder scene and added small moments of grace—including several panels in which Sabrina’s sister talks about her trauma, at an open-mike night in a café. Drnaso decided to give his royalties from the first printing to a few charities, including Camfed, a nonprofit that provides education to girls in rural sub-Saharan Africa. (Tracy Hurren, his editor at Drawn & Quarterly, recalled that she wasn’t entirely comfortable with this plan, because “we knew *he* needed the money.”) Drnaso also made a few changes to his drawings. He had never liked the way he’d drawn the face of Sabrina in the first panel of the story—she looked absent-mindedly content. He modified the curve of her mouth and gave her eyes an alert look, so that she seemed more like a deer sniffing danger.

Finally, he created a flowery back cover in a palette that is much brighter than the rest of the book. For Drnaso, the image is both a memorial to Sabrina and a tribute to Leitten, who by this time was working at a local flower shop. (In 2018, she became its co-owner.) The

back-cover image was a painting on glass, which takes much longer than an ordinary panel to create. Leitten remembers Drnaso's work on the glass painting as one of the key points in his recovery. "I think it was really good for him," she said. Drnaso told me, "It felt like a sense of finality—to paint this thing that was so far removed from the content of the book."

Last June, Drnaso and Leitten got married in his parents' back yard, in Palos Hills. Three months later, they threw a pizza party at their apartment, in Old Irving Park, in northwest Chicago. The event had the feel of a follow-up celebration—some of the guests hadn't seen them since the wedding. A wedding present from Brunetti hung on a wall by the bathroom: a pen-and-ink homage to Jan van Eyck's "The Arnolfini Portrait," with Leitten and Drnaso as the bride and groom. Brunetti had chosen the van Eyck as a visual reference not only because it depicts matrimony but also because the stiffness of some Renaissance gesture reminded him of Drnaso. "I tend to think of Nick as bottled in and coiled," Brunetti told me. "But I also get the sense he's observing—withholding judgment in the moment."

The cats prowled on the furniture, and year-round Christmas lights were on, lending a merry glow to Leitten's collection of vintage Pez dispensers. Nearly all the guests were cartoonists. Brunetti and Chris Ware were the oldest; Drnaso and Leitten had also invited a large millennial contingent. Chicago has a remarkable number of working cartoonists, maybe because it's relatively inexpensive, or maybe because, as Ware more imaginatively suggested, "it's half-way between New York City, where it's about reading, and Los Angeles, where it's about seeing."

The guests talked to one another about couch-crashing, acupuncture, and universal basic income. Fiction writers often know one another through the M.F.A. programs where they study or teach, but cartoonists have scrappier lives. "Except for Chris Ware, no one here makes a living off of comics," Drnaso explained to me. "We have to make our rent another way." Drnaso, Leitten, the surrealist Margot Ferrick,

and the absurdist sci-fi cartoonist Lane Milburn had all been employed at the Whole Foods in Lincoln Park. And Drnaso and several other guests had been part-time workers at the Busy Beaver Button Company, in Logan Square. Drnaso has been doing shifts at the factory's button-pressing machine for years. "I probably earn a few pennies per piece," he told me. "But then you do twenty-five hundred buttons in a shift, and it ends up being pretty good money. You can make like ninety bucks in five hours."

Before the party, Leitten had made batches of blueberry-pineapple and apple-nectarine jam. Her flower shop is flourishing, but she also continues to publish cartoons in the Chicago alternative press, and she maintains a studio in the apartment. Drnaso draws at a drafting table in their bedroom; he likes the setup because Leitten can't help but see his work when she comes home from the shop.

Ware and Drnaso began discussing their love of Charles Schulz, whose work Ware considers seminal in its depiction of cartoon characters with inner lives. At one point, Drnaso led Ware to his drafting table, to show him a page from his next book. Brunetti had already seen some panels, and he told me that the new work was amazing. "He's stepped up his game," he said, adding, "I hate that metaphor."

Earlier that day, I had joined Drnaso as he worked in the bedroom. He was "inking" a page from the new book—using a pen to trace over lines that he had drawn in pencil the previous day. Inking is dull work, so he didn't mind the company. It takes most cartoonists several days to complete a page that a reader can consume in under thirty seconds. Many of the cartoonists I spoke to mentioned this ratio as a way of explaining the extreme personalities who are attracted to the form.

In the manner of a movie director, Drnaso draws from a script: the words and the plot come first, then the images. The scene he was working on that day portrayed some sort of encounter group. The participants were engaged in a role-playing exercise in which a woman pretended to fire a man. If you looked carefully at the pages, you could see small details change as the scene de-

veloped. In the first panels, the two characters were sitting on folding chairs against the blank background of a performance space. A few panels later, the woman appeared to be at a desk, the man in an office chair; Drnaso had drawn a sad, small office plant behind her. This morphing, Drnaso said, signalled to the reader that the characters were getting deeper and deeper into their role-playing. It was another opportunity to smudge the border between the real and the imagined.

Next, he showed me a face that he kept redrawing. He flipped the page over and put it on a light box that he uses to check his work. "It's easier to spot a wonky eye or a misshapen head from a different perspective," he explained. He often repeatedly adjusts a drawing of a face, raising or lowering the tilt of the mouth or changing the arch of the eyebrows. "It's so nitpicky, but I draw with so few lines that every line counts," he said.

Inevitably, Drnaso had fallen out of love again with "Sabrina." (He told me later, "I fucking hate that book. I don't ever want to look at it again. It was a mistake, and I shouldn't have done it.") I asked him what his new book was about. "It's going to be about religion and identity and having a sense of purpose, but also about being emotionally manipulated in some way," he said, and added, "There's still a lot to be figured out."

He let me leaf through a printout of the twenty or so pages he'd finished so far. The constricted look of "Sabrina" was retreating. The palette was brighter. The white people were no longer all the same color. Many panels had three or more figures in them. "This story won't be so limited, you know, the way 'Sabrina' is really just *hopelessly* grounded," Drnaso promised. His characters, however, would still be united by their "emotional ineptitude." He expected that he would fold in some betrayals as he went along, but for the moment he was pleased that, in the early pages, the characters seemed to be making real connections with one another. Some of them even had mouths, and were using them to smile. "It's funny," Drnaso said. "When you're drawing people, you kind of emote with the expression you're trying to create. I think I'm enjoying the process more this time." ♦

## SHOUTS &amp; MURMURS



## IDIOMS UPDATED FOR CLIMATE CHANGE

BY GINNY HOGAN

- A rising tide floods all houses.
- A bird in the hand is worth more than it used to be because they're going extinct.
- She vanished into oddly thick air!
- Stop and smell the flower.
- One man's trash is everybody's trash because it all goes in the same enormous landfill.
- It happens only once in a blue moon, and that's pretty frequently because now the moon is all sorts of weird colors.
- She's a real force of almost entirely decimated rain forest.

- A rose by any other name would wilt and die without water, which we're running out of.
- She's so hot and cold, like the month of January.
- When it rains, it acid-rains.
- Can we please address the elephant in the room? Why has this elephant been displaced from Africa? It doesn't belong in New York City.
- Ugh, she's giving me the tepid shoulder again.
- There's got to be at least one other fish left in the sea.

- Let's save it for a rainy day—and by that I mean let's never, ever do it.
- You can lead a horse to a dried-up reservoir, but you can't make it drink dirt.
- Every cloud has a silver lining, but that's something we really ought to investigate because, much like the weirdly colored moon, clouds aren't supposed to be silver.
- Who let the cat out of the bag? Please be more careful with her. She's our *last* cat.
- It's beginning to look a lot like Christmas. (It's June.)
- You're on thin ice, buddy. In fact, we all are. If there's a part of the world that still has thick ice, we need to know about it immediately.
- You killed two birds with one stone! Unfortunately, those were the only two birds we had left.
- Don't put all your eggs in one basket—it's unclear if we'll be able to find any new eggs. As I just mentioned, all the birds are dead.
- Curiosity killed the cat—oh, wait, no, we killed it for food.
- You catch more flies with honey—here, let me show you how to catch flies. That's dinner right there.
- Don't eat a dead horse. Not until we've eaten this cat, at least.
- It's not rocket science. You know, rocket science? The only type of science that matters anymore because we need to find a new planet to live on?
- Let's cross that bridge when we come to it, as we escape this raging fire and sprint for dear life toward the rocket ship.
- She's really got her head in the clouds, which makes sense because our rocket actually is currently in the clouds.
- Time flies when you're travelling at the speed of light to escape the now uninhabitable Earth!
- You only live once—specifically, for the remainder of this spaceship ride because it's unlikely that we'll find another planet with potable water.
- Shoot for the moon, and even if you miss—damn it, we missed. Well, humans had a good run. Better luck next time.
- The world is just that one oyster. Go forth and repopulate, little one. ♦

DEPT. OF FIRST PRINCIPLES

## CHOOSE WISELY

*Do we make the big decisions—or do they make us?*

BY JOSHUA ROTHMAN

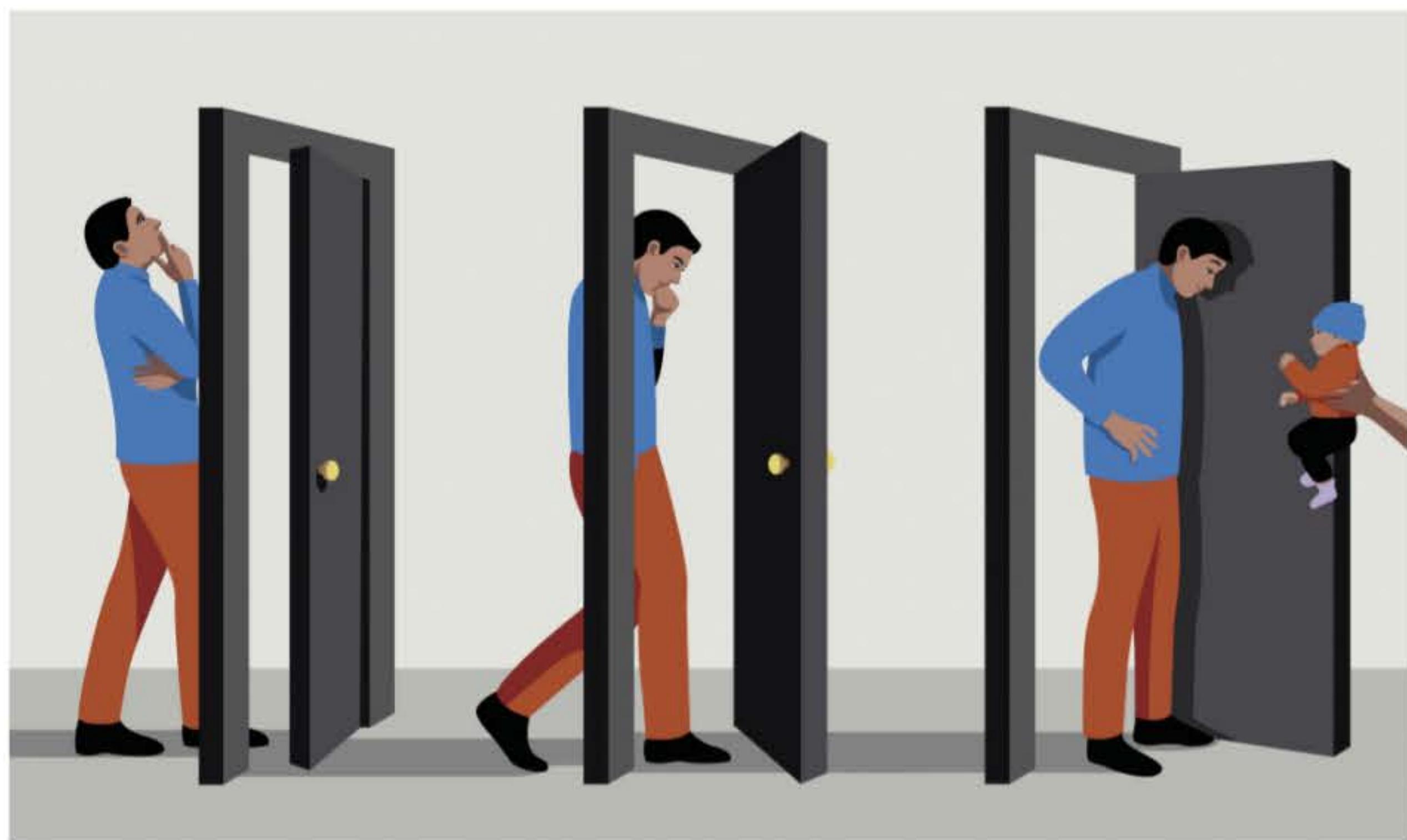
In July of 1838, Charles Darwin was twenty-nine years old and single. Two years earlier, he had returned from his voyage aboard H.M.S. Beagle with the observations that would eventually form the basis of “On the Origin of Species.” In the meantime, he faced a more pressing analytical problem. Darwin was considering proposing to his cousin Emma

age).... Home, & someone to take care of house.” He noted that it was “intolerable to think of spending one’s whole life, like a neuter bee, working, working.... Only picture to yourself a nice soft wife on a sofa with good fire and books and music perhaps.”

Beneath his lists, Darwin scrawled, “Marry, Marry, Marry QED.” And yet,

Franklin called “Prudential Algebra,” a numerical weight is assigned to each listed item, and counterbalancing items are then eliminated. (“If I find a Reason pro equal to some two Reasons con, I strike out the three . . . and thus proceeding I find at length where the Balance lies,” Franklin explained to a friend.) Even this approach, Johnson writes, is slapdash and dependent upon intuition. “The craft of making farsighted choices—decisions that require long periods of deliberation, decisions whose consequences might last for years,” he concludes, “is a strangely under-appreciated skill.”

We say that we “decide” to get married, to have children, to live in particular cities or embark on particular ca-



*Your life choices are shadowed by ignorance: you choose to be a parent without knowing what being a parent will be like.*

Wedgwood, but he worried that marriage and children might impede his scientific career. To figure out what to do, he made two lists. “Loss of time,” he wrote on the first. “Perhaps quarreling. . . . Cannot read in the evenings. . . . Anxiety and responsibility. Perhaps my wife won’t like London; then the sentence is banishment and degradation into indolent, idle fool.” On the second, he wrote, “Children (if it Please God). Constant companion (and friend in old

Steven Johnson writes, in “Farsighted: How We Make the Decisions That Matter the Most,” “we have no evidence of how he actually weighed these competing arguments against each other.” Johnson, the author of “How We Got to Now” and other popular works of intellectual history, can’t help but notice the mediocrity of Darwin’s decision-making process. He points out that Benjamin Franklin used a more advanced pro-and-con technique: in what

reers, and in a sense this is true. But how do we actually make those choices? One of the paradoxes of life is that our big decisions are often less calculated than our small ones are. We agonize over what to stream on Netflix, then let TV shows persuade us to move to New York; buying a new laptop may involve weeks of Internet research, but the deliberations behind a life-changing breakup could consist of a few bottles of wine. We’re hardly more advanced

than the ancient Persians, who, Herodotus says, made big decisions by discussing them twice: once while drunk, once while sober.

Johnson hopes to reform us. He examines a number of complex decisions with far-reaching consequences—such as the choice, made by President Barack Obama and his advisers, to green-light the raid on Osama bin Laden's presumed compound, in Abbottabad, Pakistan—and then shows how the people in charge drew upon insights from “decision science,” a research field at the intersection of behavioral economics, psychology, and management. He thinks that we should apply such techniques to our own lives.

I've never had to decide whether to launch a covert raid on a suspected terrorist compound, but I've made my share of big decisions. This past summer, my wife and I had a baby boy. His existence suggests that, at some point, I decided to become a father. Did I, though? I never practiced any prudential algebra; rather than drawing up lists of pros and cons and concluding, on balance, that having kids was a good idea, I gradually and unintentionally transitioned from not particularly wanting children to wanting them, and from wanting them to joining my wife in having them. If I made a decision, it wasn't a very decisive one. In “War and Peace,” Tolstoy writes that, while an armchair general may imagine himself “analyzing some campaign on a map” and then issuing orders, a real general never finds himself at “the beginning of some event”; instead, he is perpetually situated in the middle of a series of events, each a link in an endless chain of causation. “Can it be that I allowed Napoleon to get as far as Moscow?” Tolstoy's General Kutuzov wonders. “When was it decided? Was it yesterday, when I sent Platov the order to retreat, or was it the evening before, when I dozed off and told Bennigsen to give the orders? Or still earlier?” Unlike the capture of Moscow by Napoleon, the birth of my son was a joyous occasion. Still, like Kutuzov, I'm at a loss to explain it: it's a momentous choice, but I can't pinpoint the making of it in space or time.

For Tolstoy, the tendency of big decisions to make themselves was one of the great mysteries of existence. It sug-

gested that the stories we tell about our lives are inadequate to their real complexity. Johnson means to offer a way out of the Tolstoyan conundrum. He wants to make us writers, rather than readers, of our own stories. Doing so requires engaging with one of life's fundamental questions: Are we in charge of the ways we change?

**I**deally, we'd be omniscient and clear-headed. In reality, we make decisions in imperfect conditions that prevent us from thinking things through. This, Johnson explains, is the problem of “bounded rationality.” Choices are constrained by earlier choices; facts go undiscovered, ignored, or misunderstood; decision-makers are compromised by groupthink and by their own fallible minds. The most complex decisions harbor “conflicting objectives” and “undiscovered options,” requiring us to predict future possibilities that can be grasped, confusingly, only at “varied levels of uncertainty.” (The likelihood of marital quarrelling must somehow be compared with that of producing a scientific masterwork.) And life's truly consequential choices, Johnson says, “can't be understood on a single scale.” Suppose you're offered two jobs: one at Partners in Health, which brings medical care to the world's neediest people, and the other at Goldman Sachs. You must consider which option would be most appealing today, later this year, and decades from now; which would be preferable emotionally, financially, and morally; and which is better for you, your family, and society. From this multidimensional matrix, a decision must emerge.

Professional deciders, Johnson reports, use decision processes to navigate this complexity. Many of the best processes unfold in stages—a divergence stage might precede a convergence stage—and are undertaken by groups. (Darwin might have divided his friends into two opposing teams, in the divergence stage, and then held a debate between them.) The decision might be turned into an iterative adventure. In a series of meetings known as a “design charrette”—the concept is borrowed from the field of product design—a large problem is divided into subproblems, each of which is assigned to a group;

the groups then present their work to the whole team, receive feedback, regroup, and revise, in a cycle that loops until a decision has been made. (For architects in nineteenth-century Paris, working *en charrette* meant revising until the very last minute, even in the cart on the way to deliver a design to a panel of judges.) Charrettes are useful not just because they break up the work but because they force groups with different priorities and sensibilities—coders and designers, architects and real-estate developers—to interact, broadening the range of available viewpoints.

At firms like Royal Dutch Shell, where growth requires investing in expensive ventures, such as ports, wells, and pipelines, deciders use “scenario planning” to imagine how such investments might play out. (A scenario-planning starter kit, Johnson writes, contains three possible futures: “You build one model where things get better, one where they get worse, and one where they get weird.”) Military planners use immersive war games, carried out in the field or around a table, to bring more of the “decision map” into view. In such games, our enemies discover possibilities that we can't foresee, ameliorating the poverty of our individual imaginations. And since the games can be played over and over, they allow decision-makers to “rewind the tape,” exploring many branches of the “decision tree.”

It would be strange to stage a war game about a prospective marriage. Still, Johnson writes, decision science has lessons for us as individuals. Late in “Farsighted,” he recounts his own use of decision-scientific strategies to persuade his wife to move, with their two children, from New York City to the Bay Area. Johnson starts with intuitions—redwoods are beautiful; the tech scene is cool—but quickly moves beyond them. He conducts a “full-spectrum analysis,” arriving at various conclusions about what moving might mean financially, psychologically (will moving to a new city make him feel younger?), and existentially (will he want to have been “the kind of person who lived in one place for most of his adult life”?). Johnson summarizes his findings in a PowerPoint deck, then shows it to his wife, who raises objections that he hasn't foreseen (all her friends live in Brooklyn). Eventually, they

make a contract. They'll move, but if after two years she wants to return to New York they'll do so, "no questions asked"—a rewind.

Seven years later, they're happy with a bicoastal existence. Would Johnson have benefitted from "conducting a multidisciplinary charrette" to explore his family's move? Probably not. Still, he writes, the principles of decision science—"seeking out diverse perspectives on the choice, challenging your assumptions, making an explicit effort to map the variables"—constituted "a step up" from the pro-and-con lists that Franklin and Darwin would have made. Looking back on his decision, Johnson can at least feel confident that he made one.

Johnson's book is part of a long tradition. For centuries, philosophers have tried to understand how we make decisions and, by extension, what makes any given decision sound or unsound, rational or irrational. "Decision theory," the destination on which they've converged, has tended to hold that sound decisions flow from values. Faced with a choice—should we major in economics or in art history?—we first ask ourselves what we value, then seek to maximize that value.

From this perspective, a decision is essentially a value-maximizing equation. If you're going out and can't decide whether to take an umbrella, you could come to a decision by following a formula that assigns weights to the probability of rain, the pleasure you'll feel in strolling unencumbered, and the displeasure you'll feel if you get wet. Most decisions are more complex than this, but the promise of decision theory is that there's a formula for everything, from launching a raid in Abbottabad to digging an oil well in the North Sea. Plug in your values, and the right choice pops out.

In recent decades, some philosophers have grown dissatisfied with decision theory. They point out that it becomes less useful when we're unsure what we care about, or when we anticipate that what we care about might shift. In a 2006 article called "Big Decisions: Opting, Converting, Drifting," the late Israeli philosopher Edna Ullmann-Margalit asked us to imagine being one of "the early socialist Zionist pioneers" who,

at the turn of the twentieth century, dreamed of moving from Europe to Palestine and becoming "the New Jews of their ideals." Such a change, she observed, "alters one's life project and inner core"; one might speak of an "Old Person" who existed beforehand, browsing bookshops in Budapest, and a "New Person" who exists afterward, working a field in the desert. The point of such a move isn't to maximize one's values. It's to reconfigure them, rewriting the equations by which one is currently living one's life.

Ullmann-Margalit doubted that such transformative choices could be evaluated as sound or unsound, rational or irrational. She tells the story of a man who "hesitated to have children because he did not want to become the 'boring type'" that parents tend to become. "Finally, he did decide to have a child and, with time, he did adopt the boring characteristics of his parent friends—but he was happy!" Whose values were maximized—Old Person's or New Person's? Because no value-maximizing formula could capture such a choice, Ullmann-Margalit suggested that, rather than describing this man as having "decided" to have children, we say that he "opted" to have them—"opting" (in her usage) being what we do when we shift our values instead of maximizing them.

The nature of "opting situations," she thought, explains why people "are in fact more casual and cavalier in the way they handle their big decisions than in the way they handle their ordinary decisions." Yet it's our unexplored options that haunt us. A decision-maker who buys a Subaru doesn't dwell on the Toyota that might have been: the Toyota doesn't represent a version of herself with different values. An opter, however, broods over "the person one did not marry, the country one did not emigrate to, the career one did not pursue," seeing, in the "shadow presence" implied by the rejected option, "a yardstick" by which she might evaluate "the worth, success or meaning" of her actual life.

One might hope that a little research could bridge the divide between Old Person and New Person. In a 2013 paper titled "What You Can't Expect When You're Expecting," L. A. Paul, a philosopher at Yale, writes, "Perhaps you think that you can know what it's like to have

a child, even though you've never had one, because you can read or listen to the testimony of what it was like for others. You are wrong." Paul cites the philosopher David Lewis, who proposed what might be called the Vegemite Principle: if you've never tasted Vegemite, a mysterious and beloved Australian "food spread" made from brewer's yeast, then neither a description of what it's like (black, gooey, vegetal) nor experience with other spreads (peanut butter, marmalade, Nutella) will suffice to tell you whether you'd like it. Similarly, Paul argues, "being around other people's children isn't enough to learn about what it will be like in your own case." She explains:

Babysitting for other children, having nieces and nephews or much younger siblings—all of these can be wonderful (or horrible) experiences, but they are different in kind from having a child of your very own, perhaps roughly analogous to the way an original artwork has aesthetic value partly because of its origins. . . . Experience with other people's children might teach you about what it is like to hold a baby, to change diapers or hold a bottle, but not what it is like to create, carry, give birth to and raise a child *of your very own*.

Before having children, you may enjoy clubbing, skydiving, and LSD; you might find fulfillment in careerism, travel, cooking, or CrossFit; you may simply relish your freedom to do what you want. Having children will deprive you of these joys. And yet, as a parent, you may not miss them. You may actually prefer changing diapers, wrangling onesies, and watching "Frozen." These activities may sound like torture to the childless version of yourself, but the parental version may find them illuminated by love, and so redeemed. You may end up becoming a different person—a parent. The problem is that you can't really know, in advance, what "being a parent" is like. For Paul, there's something thrilling about this quandary. Why should today's values determine tomorrow's? In her 2014 book, "Transformative Experience," she suggests that living "authentically" requires occasionally leaving your old self behind "to create and discover a new self." Part of being alive is awaiting the "revelation" of "who you'll become."

In the months before our son was born, our sense of our ignorance mounted. "We don't know what we're waiting for,"



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my wife said. We knew in advance when he would be born—an ultrasound had revealed that he was unusually big, and a C-section had been scheduled—but the morning of his arrival unfolded with a strange familiarity. I had coffee, toasted an English muffin, and read the news; I packed clothes for the hospital into the bag that I take to work every day. At eleven, my wife and I got into the car. Her mother and a family friend drove us. At the front entrance, we hugged them goodbye.

"Good luck!" my mother-in-law said. "Your lives are about to change forever!"

"Thanks," I said. "Where are you guys going?"

"Costco," she said.

We walked inside. Upstairs, in a curtained-off nook, my wife settled into a hospital bed. For about an hour, we made small talk with the nurses, who guessed at the baby's weight, and with the surgeon, who happened to be a college classmate of ours. ("Heyyyyy!" she said when she arrived.) Occasionally we were left to ourselves. We held hands and looked at each other.

Eventually, an aide helped my wife into a wheelchair. Flanked by two nurses and wearing oversized scrubs, I pushed her down a long hallway toward the operating room. Inside, the doctors were

listening to "Stairway to Heaven" on the radio. In the midst of it all, I admired Jimmy Page's guitar solo. Afterward, I sat in the same hallway holding our baby. I had wondered if, meeting him for the first time, I would feel transformed. I felt like the same old me. And yet none of the words I knew matched the experience I was having. With my hands, I felt him breathing. Quiet and still, warm and awake, he watched me with dark-blue eyes—an actual new person.

**A**gnès Callard, a philosopher at the University of Chicago, is skeptical about the idea of sudden transformation. She's also convinced that, no matter how it looks or feels, we choose how we change. In her often moving, quietly profound book "Aspiration: The Agency of Becoming," she writes that "becoming a parent is neither something that just happens to you nor something you decide to have happen to you." Instead, Callard maintains, we "aspire" to self-transformation by trying on the values that we hope one day to possess, just as we might strike a pose in the mirror before heading out on a date. Of the man in Ullmann-Margalit's article who feared becoming a boring dad, Callard writes, "By the time

he says, 'Let's go for it,' he is actively trying to appreciate the values distinctive of parenthood." In place of a moment of decision, Callard sees a more gradual process: "Old Person aspires to become New Person."

Suppose that you sign up for a classical-music-appreciation class, in which your first assignment is to listen to a symphony. You put on headphones, press Play—and fall asleep. The problem is that you don't actually want to listen to classical music; you just want to want to. Aspiring, Callard thinks, is a common human activity: there are aspiring wine lovers, art appreciators, sports fans, fashionistas, d.j.s, executives, alpinists, do-gooders, parents, and religious believers, all hatching plans to value new things. Many ordinary decisions, moreover—such as choosing between Goldman Sachs and Partners in Health—also touch on the question of who we aspire to become.

Callard distinguishes between aspiration and ambition. Some of the people taking the music-appreciation class are ambitious; they enrolled not because they aspire to love classical music but because the class is an easy A. From the first day, they know what they value: their grades. ("Turning ambition into aspiration is one of the job descriptions of any teacher," Callard notes.) The ambitious students find it easy to explain why they're taking the class. But the aspirants must grow comfortable with a certain quantity of awkward pretense. If someone were to ask you why you enrolled, you would be overreaching if you said that you were moved by the profound beauty of classical music. The truth, which is harder to communicate, is that you have some vague sense of its value, which you hope that some future version of yourself might properly grasp.

Until aspirants can fully explain their motivations, they often underestimate their aims. An aspiring painter will say that she finds painting relaxing rather than try to explain what she hopes to express through her art. An aspiration, Callard concludes, has two faces: a near face, which represents it "as lesser than it is," and a distant one, which an aspirant is reluctant to describe, because it "ennobles her current activity beyond its rightful status."

Being a well-meaning phony is key



"You're awfully quiet tonight."

to our self-transformations. "Consider what kind of thinking motivates a good student to force herself to listen to a symphony when she feels herself dozing off," Callard writes:

She reminds herself that her grade and the teacher's opinion of her depend on the essay she will write about this piece; or she promises herself a chocolate treat when she gets to the end; or she's in a glass-walled listening room of the library, conscious of other students' eyes on her; or perhaps she conjures up a romanticized image of her future, musical self, such as that of entering the warm light of a concert hall on a snowy evening.

These are "bad" reasons for listening to classical music, Callard says, but "bad" reasons are how she moves herself forward, all the while seeing them as bad, which is to say, as placeholders for the 'real' reason."

When we're aspiring, inarticulateness isn't a sign of unreasonableness or incapacity. In fact, the opposite may be true. "Everyone goes to college 'to become educated,'" Callard observes, "but until I am educated I do not really know what an education is or why it is important." If we couldn't aspire to changes that we struggle to describe, we'd be trapped within the ideas that we already have. Our inability to explain our reasons is a measure of how far we wish to travel. It's only after an aspirant has reached her destination, Callard writes, that "she will say, 'This was why.'"

**B**ecause aspirations take a long time to come to fruition, they're always at risk of interruption. Ullmann-Margalit's 2006 paper makes mention of someone who opts "to leave the corporate world in order to become an artist." Callard sees that sort of move as the result of an aspiration—a process that starts small, perhaps with a random stroll through an art museum, and culminates, years later, after one opens a pottery studio. The trouble is that some values preclude others. An aspiring artist must reject the corporate virtues to which he once aspired and embrace creative ones in their place. If a family illness forces him to abandon his artistic plans, he may end up adrift—disenchanted with corporate life, but unable to grasp the real satisfactions of an artistic existence. To aspire, Callard writes, is to judge one's present-day self by the

standards of a future self who doesn't yet exist. But that can leave us like a spider plant putting down roots in the air, hoping for soil that may never arrive.

Callard revisits Paul's "What You Can't Expect When You're Expecting." In that paper, Paul explored a strange consequence of the Vegemite Princi-



ple: if there's no rational way to decide to have a child—because you can't know what you've never experienced—then there's also no rational reason for being disappointed about not having one. (Such disappointment isn't "wrong, or blameworthy, or subjectively unreasonable," Paul notes—just nonrational.) Callard disagrees. She sees infertility as a form of interrupted aspiration. An aspiring mother who can't have children is rational in feeling sad, she writes, and "this is so even if—indeed, it is true in part because—she cannot quite see what she would be missing."

Before we had our son, I began exploring the "near face" of being a parent. I noticed how cute babies and children could be and pictured our spare room as a nursery; I envisaged my wife and I taking our child to the beach near our house (my version of "entering the warm light of a concert hall on a snowy evening"). I knew that these imaginings weren't the real facts about having children—clearly, there was more to having kids than cuteness. All the same, I had no way of grasping the "distant face" of fatherhood. It was something I aspired to know.

As it turned out, my wife and I had trouble having children. It took us five years to navigate the infertility maze. For much of that time, we lived with what Callard describes as the "distinctive kind of sadness appropriate to losing something you were only starting to try to get to know." This sadness, Callard points out, has a complement in the disappointment one might feel after "having to abandon one's educational aspirations

for motherhood": "The aspiring college student who must give up those dreams to raise a child is liable to feel that she was counting on the college experience to make her life meaningful." Callard quotes from "Barren in the Promised Land," a book about infertility by the historian Elaine Tyler May. "The grief—the loss," a woman tells May. "I spent six years of my life trying to be a mom, and it was beyond my control. For a while I couldn't look ahead. I thought, how do I define myself if I don't do this? What am I if not a parent?" It might be easier if our biggest transformations were instantaneous, because then we wouldn't need to live in states of aspiration. Certain of who we were, we'd never get stuck between selves.

**I** read "Aspiration" last spring, before my son was born, and I talked about it often with my wife. We were especially struck by Callard's argument that parenthood is intrinsically aspirational. Parents look forward to a loving relationship with a specific person. And yet that person doesn't pop into existence fully formed; he emerges, in all his specificity, over many years. For this reason, it makes little sense to be an "ambitious parent"—someone who plans, in advance, what he will love about his child. It's better to "enter parenthood for the most inchoate of reasons," Callard concludes, since that "puts our children in a position to fill out what parenthood means for us"; in turn, parental love must "be capable of molding itself to the personality that is, itself, coming to take a determinate shape."

For the most part, Callard's book is a systematic overview, situated outside the moment. Still, she writes, for aspirants "what happens in the meanwhile is also life." Now that our son is here, we live entirely in the meanwhile. We don't want the present, or its mystery, to end. Each day is absorbing and endlessly significant. Recently, I watched my father's face as he watched my son's. Later, we listened as my son learned a new kind of laugh. Each time he looks at us, he sees us more in his own way. Like pages that turn themselves, the meaningful instants follow one another too soon. It's hard to think of them as stepping stones on the way to anywhere else. ♦

## PROFILES

## BLURRED LINES

*The artist Gerhard Richter disavows a new film inspired by his life. Is it too far from the truth, or too close?*

BY DANA GOODYEAR

“Dear Mr. Richter,” the letter began. “I have been working on the idea for a feature film, about which I would like to talk to you, if you can make that possible. Could you give me an hour of your time?” The author, the German filmmaker Florian Henckel von Donnersmarck, had been trying to get in touch with Gerhard Richter for quite some time. Mutual acquaintances had refused to make an introduction; no one wanted to jeopardize a relationship with the man widely considered to be the greatest painter alive. So Donnersmarck, who is full of what Ulrich Mühe, the lead actor in Donnersmarck’s first film, “The Lives of Others,” called “implacable friendliness,” resorted to mailing a handwritten letter to an address listed on Richter’s official Web site. A few days later, Richter responded, with an invitation to visit him in Cologne.

It had been almost a decade since “The Lives of Others,” which explores the Stasi surveillance of artists in the waning days of the German Democratic Republic, was awarded the 2006 Oscar for best foreign-language film. Like many European auteurs before him, Donnersmarck, who was thirty-three when he won, found himself drawn centripetally toward Hollywood. He and his wife, Christiane, a lawyer who oversaw the international operations of Creative Commons and now facilitates Donnersmarck’s career, moved to Los Angeles with their three children. The family rented a nineteen-thirties estate in the Pacific Palisades, near the house where Thomas Mann once lived.

In 2009, Donnersmarck, an unabashed admirer of Hollywood maximalism—he heaps praise on “The Terminator”—co-wrote and directed a hundred-million-dollar studio movie, “The Tourist,” in which a spy and her lover, played by Angelina Jolie and Johnny Depp, evade both the Mafia and Scotland Yard in the

canals of Venice. Critics had applauded the previous film; now many were dismayed. In the *Times*, Manohla Dargis was gently damning. “It takes an exceptional director to prevent an entertainment as flimsy as this from collapsing under its own weightlessness,” she wrote. “The Tourist” went on to earn two hundred and seventy-eight million dollars worldwide, but Donnersmarck wasn’t eager to repeat the experience. “It was a bit like you had stayed at a super-luxurious spa,” he told me. “It’s beautiful and objectively great, but it feels hollow. I didn’t have that feeling of: Only I can do this.” His friends began to worry. “I told him he should be careful not to lose too much time,” Jan Mojto, who financed “The Lives of Others,” told me. “He said, ‘Between Thomas Mann’s “Buddenbrooks” and “Royal Highness” there are nearly ten years.’ I thought, He’s losing his mind, so better bring him back. Then Florian tells me, ‘I have an idea.’”

Donnersmarck had been looking for a way to illustrate, in film, the healing power of art. Over breakfast in Los Angeles, he explained how Richter had turned a life of profound trauma and loss into creative grist. “This man has lived through everything imaginable,” he told me. “He’s lived through his mother being raped by the Russians, his father committing suicide, his aunt being euthanized, both of his uncles being killed on the Eastern Front, his childhood classmates being killed in the bombing of Dresden, the experience of incredible impoverishment. Yet he manages to take all these things and charge them, in his paintings, with this mystical energy that comes from the suffering.” In this way, Donnersmarck said, art becomes an emblem of resilience, even productivity: “It gives us that wonderful feeling that our suffering can be of use.”

At eighty-six, Richter, known for an astonishingly diverse practice that includes photo-realistic portraits, Roman-

tic landscapes, and conceptual abstractions, hovers numinously over German art, at once omnipresent and nowhere to be found. Born in Dresden in 1932, he lived through Nazism, the Second World War, and the Communist occupation, before defecting to the West in the nineteen-sixties. But, when faced with curiosity about his person and his work, he has often deployed John Cage’s witty dodge: “I have nothing to say, and I am saying it.” His life story is a meticulously concocted living text, mediated by his paintings, which tell a story of their own.

In the sixties, Richter started making his photo paintings, recognizable by a characteristic blur. The paintings purportedly represented random snapshots of strangers, and their generic titles—“Family at the Seaside,” “Mother and Child”—encouraged this reading. As Richter grew more prominent, he began to refer to “cuckoos’ eggs,” biographical truths hidden in his work. Still, when an interviewer asked about the seeming banality of his source material, he replied, “It’s all evasive action.” Sometimes he explained himself by saying, “My paintings know more than I do.”

“I believe that great art is deeply biographical,” Donnersmarck told me. Anthony Minghella, the director of “The Talented Mr. Ripley,” one of Donnersmarck’s favorite films, had no direct experience of American expats on the Italian Riviera, but he drew upon the oppressive class consciousness of his English childhood to lend authenticity to Tom Ripley’s striving. Studying Richter’s work, Donnersmarck learned that he had taken unusual pains to control its reception. Since the sixties, Richter has been compiling his own catalogue raisonné, an official list of works usually assembled by scholars and curators. Furthermore, he started the clock on his œuvre in 1962, after his arrival in the West, erasing a period as a prominent socialist-realist artist in the East, where



*The director, Florian von Donnersmarck, set out to solve a mystery that he found in one of Richter's most famous portraits.*



*"I wouldn't have spent so much time fixing this place up if I'd known we'd be leaving so soon."*

he had been commissioned to paint murals extolling the ideals of the republic. "He was someone who was quite guarded about his personal things," Donnersmarck told me. "Although, on the other hand, it's also partly that he just *tells* us he's guarded about his personal things." Taken together, he felt, Richter's feints amounted to a pixelated portrait. "Here was someone who never really told the full story, and was steering people in a certain way," he said. Donnersmarck had set out to research a master of visual representation; now he was beginning to view Richter as what he calls "a master of narrative."

One painting in particular troubled Donnersmarck. "Ema (Nude on a Staircase)" depicts a luminous nude, Richter's first wife, Ema Eufinger, who, as Richter later noted, bore a resemblance to Brigitte Bardot. Art historians contended that the image was part of Richter's dialogue with Marcel Duchamp, who had ostentatiously quit painting after completing his own "Nude Descending a Staircase," in 1912. But Donnersmarck suspected that there was something more than the anxiety of influence at work.

Richter typically dates his canvases with only the year; this one is marked "May, 1966," as if the month held special significance. Where the previous photo paintings relied mostly on a grayscale palette, Ema glows with nacreous pink skin and golden hair—her body "seems to shine from within," as one critic put it. In fact, she was pregnant, with Richter's first child, Betty, who was born later that year and would become the subject of some of his most arresting portraits. It was the convergence of two details—Ema's pregnancy and the date—that stuck in Donnersmarck's mind, suggesting a mystery that he was determined to solve. "I thought, O.K., I've now read the major texts on him. I've researched this thoroughly. I'm very familiar with his work. I have to at least throw my theory at him and see how he reacts," he said. "I was thinking that I'd maybe be thrown out after half an hour."

In January of 2015, Donnersmarck showed up at Richter's home. "The most extraordinary thing happened," he said. "I outlined to him what I planned to do, really just thinking I'd glean from

his reaction—Was I on a completely crazy path, or was there something true about it?" Surprisingly, Richter didn't turn him out. "That first day, I ended up staying seven hours or so." After several more sessions, Donnersmarck said, "I asked him, 'I have a good memory, but I don't remember everything. Do you mind if I record this?'"

Donnersmarck grew up stringently Catholic, a choirboy, and he still attends Mass; as an artist, he frames his goals transgressively. His intention, he says, is "to write like I'm wiretapping a confession booth." He told me that Richter accepted his presence, though he suspected that Sabine Moritz, Richter's third wife and former student, opposed it. Richter went so far as to allow him to accompany the couple on an anniversary trip to Dresden. "He told me everything—truly everything—about his life, and was amazingly open," Donnersmarck said. "I ended up staying for one month and recording this stuff, which really I think makes any biography of his completely obsolete."

During the next three years, Donnersmarck wrote and directed "Never Look Away," an epic spanning three decades of German history. (The German title, "Werk Ohne Autor," or "Work Without Author," is a tag that critics in the seventies applied to Richter's art, because of its seeming lack of subjectivity.) The film hews closely to Richter's youthful experiences, particularly his first marriage, but leaves room for conflation and outright invention. Donnersmarck's protagonist, Kurt Barnert, is a sensitive and talented painter from the East who marries into a family that, while outwardly conforming to the new postwar politics, privately adheres to the most repulsive aspects of Nazi ideology. "I didn't want it to be a bio-pic *per se*," Donnersmarck told me. "Sticking exactly to every fact and chronology tends to weaken something. 'Citizen Kane' would be a lesser film if it were called 'Citizen Hearst.'"

"Never Look Away" is on the shortlist for a best foreign-language Oscar and opens in New York and Los Angeles on February 8th. When I met up with Donnersmarck this past fall, in L.A., shortly after the film's German theatrical run, he was perturbed. A rift had opened between him and his sub-

ject. "Suddenly, there was this *statement* from him," Donnersmarck said. Richter had not seen the film, but, hounded for comment by the German press, he had let slip that he found the trailer too "*reißerisch*," or thriller-like. The insult stung, a rebuke of the intimate understanding that Donnersmarck had felt existed between them.

Not long ago, I wrote to Richter, asking if he could tell me about his interactions with Donnersmarck. To my surprise, he wrote back within a few days:

I thank you for your kind letter about the film of Florian Henckel von Donnersmarck. To recall all the events, I had a look into the quite hefty folder regarding the case von Donnersmarck. Unfortunately, this visualization of all the facts caused such bad feelings, and my dislike of both the movie and the person grew so much again, that I find it impossible to give you an answer.

I hope for your understanding, but I can't help it.

With best regards,  
Gerhard Richter

Donnersmarck is six feet nine, with a baby face and an accumulation of gray-blond curls that look ready to dump rain—a cherub and his cloud. He has storybook grandeur, and an expansive sense of time. He lets weeks pass between e-mails, then sends novellas. Our first breakfast lasted four and a half hours, and earned me two parking tickets. He was unusually interested in being a subject. "Free analysis," he called it.

Courtly manners, a social necessity for a giant living among humans, are also the inheritance of a family that traces its nobility back six hundred years; he says that "Donnersmarck," which he translates as "Thunder Marrow," is the name that his Saxon ancestor Henckel was given by Kaiser Matthias in gratitude for funding a war against the Turks. Donnersmarck, a count, has a booming laugh. He speaks five languages, including Russian, and has a whippet named Tsarevich. It is hard to find a car that can accommodate his size, but he makes the best of it. For a while, he drove around Los Angeles in a vintage white Rolls-Royce, until the brakes gave out in the hills above Sunset Boulevard. "You can't buy a car like that in Germany," Thomas Demand, a German artist who lives in Los Angeles and is close to Donnersmarck, says. "You would look like a pimp."

During the Second World War, the bankable part of Donnersmarck's inheritance vanished behind the Iron Curtain, with family castles reduced to ruins. The family—which Donnersmarck describes as too cultured to have been Nazis—was uprooted. His grandfather, a doctor of philosophy specializing in Thomas Aquinas, was drafted at the end of the war, and immediately found an American to surrender to. His father, Leo Ferdinand, had spent his childhood preparing to take over the Donnersmarck mining and agricultural operations in Silesia, an area that was once easternmost Germany and is now largely in Poland. In 1945, notices went up in Silesia: all Germans had to vacate immediately, leaving the keys in their locks, on pain of death. Leo Ferdinand became, at the age of nine, a refugee.

"Because of all the terrible suffering Germany caused in World War Two, there wasn't a lot of focus on what the German people suffered, understandably," Donnersmarck told me. "But many people were apolitical, and suffered the way Richter's family suffered, and the way mine did." Donnersmarck's mother, Anna-Maria, remembers being four, fleeing to relatives in the West. "Our mother made it an adventure," she said. "Women in that time, they were all heroes. They had the children, their husbands were dead or captive and the women were in Berlin. They cleaned up the whole city with their hands. They made a mountain where people go skiing now, formed from the dirt and stones from the war."

Donnersmarck's father was among the first in the family to need a job. He became an executive at Lufthansa, and when Florian was one and his brother, Sebastian, was three the family moved to Roosevelt Island, as part of a social experiment to establish an economically diverse colony on "Welfare Island." Florian was so blond that women in the city would annoy him by touching his hair, and so tall that his mother brought along his passport when they ran errands, in order to prove that he was young enough to ride the bus for free.

Leo Ferdinand was deeply religious, traditional, and intellectual. Walking through a European capital with him was a master class in declinism. Donnersmarck said, "He found it hard to re-

member the names of those who weren't from Catholic noble families." Anna-Maria, on the other hand, had been active in the leftist student movement in West Berlin, and collected sophisticated people. Her best friend in New York was John White, an Austrian Jewish émigré who directed the City Opera and was a mentor to Florian. "I grew up in a world in which the objective quantification of intelligence and eloquence and erudition was valued above all else," Donnersmarck told me. Sometimes he performed too well for his audience's taste. "He was pretentious," Anna-Maria said. "When he was thirteen, I took him to the opera in Frankfurt. 'How did you like it?' I asked. He said, 'I liked it, but I could do it better.'"

Anna-Maria had high standards for art, which extended to her sons' output. She told me, "When they made pictures, I did not put them on the fridge unless they were good, and they were very rarely good. There were not many pictures on my fridge. Florian thought I was too critical, too strict. I said, 'Florian, do you want me to lie to you?' This is my influence—that he wants to prove that he is the best in the world to his critical mother. He got the gift from Leo Ferdinand, and from me the drive to prove me wrong."

Last winter, I went to see Donnersmarck in Berlin, where he was finishing postproduction on "Never Look Away." It had been eight months since I'd last seen him in Los Angeles—when he had read me the entire three-and-a-half-hour screenplay, in the course of two days—and he had been working twenty hours a day on the film. (He is a sleep-walker, imperfectly cured. Only the first floor of a hotel is safe for him, and he sleeps with the lights on.) His hair had turned whiter and wilder, and I got the impression that he'd been sustaining himself with editing-room chocolates.

In a comfortable sound studio, overlooking the River Spree, Donnersmarck was doing dialogue replacement, re-recording some two hundred lines that hadn't come out well during filming. It is tedious work for most people, but Donnersmarck relishes the chance to tune and polish flaws. "Suddenly, you can heal all those little wounds," he says. "It's very, very joyful." For a scene in which one character subversively advises another to

mutter "Drei liter" instead of "Heil Hitler," Donnersmarck instructed the actor on the precise quality of the stifled laugh he was after. "We have to bring up some of your tonality a notch," he said. "It needs to be more nasal. It wants it to be more coming from the throat, so it's rattling more. Try to do it as if you're just about to clear your throat, a bit more pressure."

Later that afternoon, the actor Sebastian Koch came to the studio. Koch, who played a writer under surveillance in "The Lives of Others," returns in "Never Look Away" as Barnert's sinister father-in-law. In the scene that they were working on, he orders Barnert to paint his portrait. To prepare Koch for the line that needed to be replaced, Donnersmarck said, "Du hast ein neues sujet,"

emphasizing certain words in the way of a choral conductor tweaking the phrasing of a song. "Feel in yourself how superior you are compared to Kurt," he said. "Be really aloof, almost arrogant: I descend to your pitiful way of life by even talking to you." Koch told me later, "He's fully formed as a perfectionist. As in, 'We'll do it again. No, we'll do it again.' He believes strongly that, if an actor thinks something wrong, he can read those thoughts."

As Koch got ready for another line, Donnersmarck told him, "You're worried, and it should come through in your whole demeanor, but you're still controlled and that means your breathing is steady, yet there is a certain nervousness about it." Koch, visible through a glass wall in an adjacent sound booth, jumped up and down and fluttered his lips. Fifteen or twenty takes later, Donnersmarck quickly said, "Sehr schön," and moved on.

In the evening, as the city turned pale, Donnersmarck and I got into a taxi. "You're best behind the driver," he said, as he claimed the front passenger side for himself, pushing the seat all the way back and reclining it as far as it could go. "It's a very ungallant way to ride, but the only way it works," he said. We were going to meet his mother. I asked if I should call her "Mrs. Donnersmarck." He said, "Mrs.' is wrong. The correct formal address would be Countess

Henckel. But she'll want you to call her Anna-Maria. My mother is a big all-women-are-sisters kind of woman."

Leo Ferdinand died nearly a decade ago, and Anna-Maria, who has shoulder-length blond hair and vivid blue eyes, lives in a cozy apartment in Charlottenburg, the Upper East Side of West Berlin. Above the coatrack hangs a portrait of an ancestor Anna-Maria calls "the family prince," a rake who married a French courtesan and built her a castle in Silesia, which was bombed by the Russians. "It's like 'Gone with the Wind,'" Anna-Maria told me. "Nobody has any money anymore. They all work."

Anna-Maria showed us to the living room, where Donnersmarck's brother, Sebastian, a physics teacher at a high school in Berlin, was sitting. On a coffee table was a silver tray filled with dishes of macadamia nuts, malt balls, mini-Snickers, and sugary wafers. When Donnersmarck reached for a Snickers, his mother shot him a reproving look. "Nicht gut für dich," she said. He ignored her, and took a wafer, too. She brought a board with rye bread and sliced ham. "My big child should eat something," she exhorted him.

After leaving Roosevelt Island in 1981, the family moved to Berlin, a jarring experience for the two boys. "My brother and I felt like we'd been thrown into a harsher, colder, and poorer place," Donnersmarck said. "All the American products we'd grown up with were sold in stores here that you couldn't access as a German citizen. The American military areas were cordoned off. Those people could buy marshmallows and peanut butter."

American movies offered a reprieve and a way back, even if they were shown a year after release. The brothers, both tall, with long hair, would dress as girls so that they looked old enough to sneak into Clint Eastwood movies. Sebastian said, "We grew up on 'Star Wars' and 'Indiana Jones.'" Anna-Maria turned to Florian. "I pushed you into exhibitions, opera, theatre," she said. "You *hated* exhibitions." Florian shrugged, and changed the subject. Seeing art with his parents, he later explained, was compli-

cated. For a Catholic boy, the bald eroticism of German art in the eighties was both liberating and confusing. Small wonder if he squirmed in front of a self-portrait of an artist fellating himself. I asked Anna-Maria if he had evinced any inclination toward art. "Not a bit," she said. "He was always interested in psychoanalysis."

Donnersmarck attended Oxford, and, egged on by his brother, entered an essay-writing contest whose first prize was an apprenticeship with Richard Attenborough. He won. As he walked from the studio to the train station each day, Attenborough would pass in a beautiful Rolls-Royce. "I always thought that one day he would pick me up," Donnersmarck says. "He never did. I remember thinking, If I ever make enough money, I'll get exactly that car."

After university, Donnersmarck went to film school in Munich. In a book about "The Lives of Others," he wrote that, while struggling to come up with movie premises for an assignment, he put on a recording of the Russian pianist Emil Gilels playing the "Moonlight" Sonata. While listening, he remembered reading that Lenin once said that, until his revolution was complete, he would not permit himself to listen to Beethoven's "Appassionata," because it inspired him to "stroke the heads of people" rather than to "strike, strike pitilessly." Donnersmarck began to wonder how history might have been different if Lenin had been compelled to hear that music. "An image forced itself into my mind," he wrote. "A medium shot of a man in a desolate room; he has headphones over his ears through which comes the sound of wonderful music." This image—a listener overhearing something that might make him abandon his deepest beliefs—gave rise to "The Lives of Others," which became Donnersmarck's thesis project and, eight years later, his first feature.

"The Lives of Others" centers on Gerd Wiesler, a Stasi surveillance specialist, assigned to eavesdrop on a celebrated playwright and his actress girlfriend, who is the romantic obsession of a powerful Central Committee minister. Wiesler wires the couple's apartment and installs himself in the attic of the building. The playwright believes in the basic righteousness of the German Dem-



ocratic Republic, while his closest friends are punished for their doubts. When one of them commits suicide, he becomes disillusioned, and, convinced that his apartment is the last unbugged place in East Berlin, starts writing a treatise against the government, to be published in the West. Listening in, Wiesler finds his own loyalties shifting, and alters his reports to protect his subject. But, in a skillfully turned plot, the actress, having spurned the rapacious minister, is threatened by the Stasi and begins informing on the playwright, betraying what Wiesler has withheld.

The life story of the poet and songwriter Wolf Biermann echoes through "The Lives of Others." Biermann, a Bob Dylan of the G.D.R., was placed under house arrest and banned from publishing. According to Donnersmarck, Biermann was among the first Germans to seek out his Stasi files after reunification. Biermann, who published parts of the files, has written that they contained a plan for how to ruin him, including "destruction of all love relationships and friendships" and "faulty medical treatment." Donnersmarck read the published files, and managed to find and interview at length the agent who oversaw the investigation of Biermann. Like Wiesler in the film, the agent was a model of ideological correctness. Donnersmarck says that even twelve years after the Wall came down the agent was unsure what he was allowed to say about Biermann. "He was, like, 'By what laws am I bound right now? Can I tell you details about this guy's sex life? I was sworn to secrecy by a government that no longer exists,'" Donnersmarck told me. "It was total confusion of information loyalties, but he ended up telling me everything."

Biermann was far less forthcoming. Donnersmarck thought that he might gain entrée through Anna-Maria, who, in her student-movement days, had visited Biermann when he was under house arrest. But Biermann ignored his entreaties. So Donnersmarck, relentless, approached him in the book-signing line after a reading. "I know exactly who you are," Donnersmarck recalled his saying. "And I'll tell you one thing: If I'm going to say something about the Stasi, I'm going to say it myself."

"The Lives of Others" created con-

troversy in Germany. Ulrich Mühe, who played Wiesler, had been a theatre actor in the East. When the film was released, he disclosed that he had read his own Stasi file, and found evidence that his former wife had served as an informant. (The documents, Donnersmarck says, showed that she had even asked the state's permission before marrying him.) To critics, the revelation seemed to be part of a cynical marketing campaign. Mühe's ex-wife sued him for libel and won, despite the documentation. Mühe, who had developed ulcers as a young man when conscripted as a border guard, died of stomach cancer soon afterward.

Easterners who had been oppressed by the Stasi found the character of the agent too sympathetic; those who hadn't been oppressed said the whole thing was sensationalized. Donnersmarck's experience of the East was limited to teen-age excursions through the checkpoint with his parents, to visit his mother's childhood friends. It embarrasses him now to remember how he and his brother, alert to the injustices suffered by fellow-Germans, would roll down the car windows and call out the lyrics

of a popular song, "Thoughts are free! No one can ever know them, no one can hunt them down!" He was sixteen when the Wall fell, detractors often noted: What could Florian Henckel von Donnersmarck from West Berlin know about the G.D.R.?

"I still meet people from the East who say, 'This is not a good film,'" Sebastian Koch told me. "But point for point they can't explain why not." "The Lives of Others" was denied a competition spot at the Berlin Film Festival, at Cannes, and at Venice. It made its première at Telluride, and, after winning the Oscar, became, with "Das Boot," the most successful German-language film in history. "It was loved everywhere except here," Koch said.

Biermann, however, praised the film. "The political tone is authentic, I was moved by the plot," he wrote. "But why? Perhaps I was just won over sentimentally, because of the seductive mass of details that look like they were lifted from my own past." Or maybe Biermann had already made his peace with up-close observation. In the seventies, not long before he was exiled while on



*"You've come to a fork in the road—age-defying or age-appropriate?"*

tour in the West, he wrote "The Stasi Ballad." Its refrain, "Stasi is my Ecker-  
mann," refers to Goethe's compulsive  
assistant, who documented his every ut-  
terance. "It's an amazing ballad, where  
he said how incredibly grateful he is to  
the Stasi for recording everything he  
ever said for posterity," Donnersmarck  
told me. "They're trying to destroy his  
life, but at least they're paying attention,  
in the way that every artist wants peo-  
ple to pay attention."

**R**ichter's cuckoos' eggs serve as a  
test of attentiveness: Did you catch  
that? One of his earliest photo paint-  
ings, a tender black-and-white portrait  
of a teen-age girl holding a baby, was  
first exhibited with the unremarkable  
title "Mother and Child." "It could be  
*any* mother and child," Dietmar Elger,  
the director of Richter's archive and  
the writer of his authorized biography,  
told me. "In the beginning, in the six-  
ties, he was hesitating about making  
his art too personal." Later, Richter re-  
named the painting "Aunt Marianne,"  
and over time it emerged that the  
woman it depicted was his mother's  
younger sister. The baby was the artist  
himself, at three months old.

Marianne Schönfelder, Richter's aunt,  
was a delicate, attractive girl, who, by  
the time she was twenty, had been  
institutionalized with a diagnosis of  
schizophrenia. Mental illness was a dan-  
gerous label to wear in Nazi Germany.  
Mentally ill and physically and intellec-  
tually disabled women were subjected  
to forced sterilization, and in 1940 the  
government established a medical-  
murder program, with six execution cen-  
ters, equipped with "showers," to destroy  
them. By 1941, when Hitler shut the  
gassing program down, some thirty-five  
thousand women had been killed at  
these sites, in what Donnersmarck de-  
scribed to me as "a dress rehearsal for  
the greatest crime in history." By the  
end of the war, at least a hundred thou-  
sand women deemed unfit for procre-  
ation had been exterminated.

In 1938, Schönfelder was committed  
to a psychiatric nursing home in the  
eastern state of Saxony, not far from the  
town where Richter's family had moved.  
While a patient there, she was invol-  
untarily sterilized; later, she was trans-  
ferred to a psychiatric hospital, where

she was deliberately starved to death in  
1945, and buried in a mass grave.

In a childhood riven by catastrophe,  
the tragedy of Aunt Marianne held  
a special place. According to Jürgen  
Schreiber, an investigative journalist  
who wrote a biography of Richter in  
2005, she loomed over the household.  
"If Gerd was unruly," Schreiber wrote,  
"his mother would threaten him, 'You'll  
end up like Aunt Marianne.'" On Rich-  
ter's Web site, where his works are cat-  
egorized according to subject—Clouds,  
Candles, Families, Aeroplanes, Snow-  
scapes, Nudes—the "Aunt Marianne"  
painting falls under the heading Death.

While at art school, in Dresden, Rich-  
ter met another Marianne, a fashion  
student nicknamed Ema, whose father  
was a prominent ob-gyn. The couple,  
who married in 1957, lived at her father's  
house in Dresden. In the course of re-  
searching his book, Schreiber visited  
the house, and made a significant dis-  
covery. "A woman came to me and said,  
'Here lived a super-Nazi!'" he wrote to  
me in an e-mail. "I was highly alarmed.  
And then I started a new investigation."

In the federal archives, Schreiber  
discovered that Ema's father, Heinrich  
Eufinger, had served as a lieutenant col-  
onel in the S.S., Hitler's "racial élite," a  
leadership squad entrusted with exe-  
cuting his Final Solution. Eufinger's  
files referred to him as an "irreproach-  
able SS-man," who was meticulous  
about proving his Aryan ancestry. Later,  
when Eufinger was promoted and as-  
signed to care for future S.S. wives in



Saxony, he evaluated them for their  
"suitability for marriage among mem-  
bers of the S.S.;" to his superiors, he  
recommended a more exacting process,  
including a gynecological exam and,  
for the prospective groom, a manda-  
tory sperm count. Otherwise, Eufinger  
wrote, "no certainty can ever be ob-  
tained as to the effective functioning  
of the procreative organs."

For nearly a decade, until he was ar-  
rested by the Russians in 1945, Eufinger  
served as the director of Friedrichstadt  
Hospital, in Saxony, where nearly a  
thousand women were forcibly steri-  
lized, most of them by him. The young-  
est victim was eleven years old. Eufinger  
did not perform Schönfelder's steriliza-  
tion—that task was carried out by the  
doctor who had delivered Richter.

As Eufinger would surely have  
known, sterilization was a station on  
the road to death. Many of the women  
sterilized at Friedrichstadt Hospital  
were subsequently murdered by the  
state. After the war, other physicians  
from the region—including the doctor  
who oversaw Schönfelder's case—were  
tried in Dresden for crimes against  
humanity, and some were sentenced to  
death. Eufinger, however, went on to  
have a distinguished career in the  
G.D.R. and then, after emigrating, in  
West Germany. Until Schreiber's re-  
porting, his portrait still hung on the  
wall of Friedrichstadt Hospital.

The natural question to ask is: What  
did Richter know? (Richter told Schre-  
iber that Ema had seen her father preen-  
ing before the mirror in his S.S. uni-  
form and been appalled.) In Richter's  
case, the more relevant question may  
be: What did his paintings know? Rich-  
ter and Ema defected to the West in  
1961, shortly before the Wall went up.  
Among the few possessions Richter  
took with him was an album filled with  
family pictures, which he soon started  
to use as source material.

Within two years of painting "Aunt  
Marianne," Richter painted his father-  
in-law, as well as an architect of the  
euthanasia program, who killed him-  
self rather than face a war-crimes tri-  
bunal. The father-in-law painting is  
"Family at the Seaside." Grotesquely, it  
depicts Eufinger at the beach with Ema,  
her sister, and one of his patients, all  
grinning in their bathing suits, around  
the time that Schönfelder was steri-  
lized. Elger, Richter's archivist, told me  
that the association among the three  
subjects—father-in-law, aunt, eutha-  
nasia mastermind—was unconscious.  
"They fit together now very perfectly,  
but I'm not sure if they were painted as  
a group," he said.

Donnersmarck takes literally the idea  
that Richter's paintings know some-

## CLIFFHANGING

The forces out to kill us with their benevolence  
are more crazed now than they were when you were alive.  
And more focussed, too. Our ingratitude excites them.  
They're bubbling with remedies.  
Their providential impulses are a nimbus of knives.  
Their need to tell us they love us, love us,  
with all their love in vain . . .

You said before you died that this would happen.  
Thanks for the warning. You didn't let me know, though,  
that even our phantom selves would come after us,  
crawling out of the poems we made.  
They don't care about the transparent skin we wrapped them in  
so they could watch their organs pulsing within.  
All they know is that we made their eyes too bright.  
They see more than they can stand,  
more than we ever could or would. They see the unending savagery  
that we could never really bear to see,  
and so we consigned our sight to them.  
They hate us for it. They've cut the phone lines,  
and are chainsawing the front door.

I'm a little worried about myself because  
all this hostility from every quarter bothers me  
much less than it should. Why the disconnect? I can't figure it out.  
And it's long past time to take precautions.  
The great wave that breaks through the crust of the world  
is rising and rising and lifting me far inland,  
only to suck me back and drop me dangling by one arm  
on the edge of the half-eaten cliff.  
I won't let myself fall, but I don't want to pull myself up.  
I'm ambivalent. I'm ambivalent forever now.  
But if you were here, looking down on me and saying,  
"Grab my hand, grab my hand," I would, I know, I surely would.

—Vijay Seshadri

thing, and are trying to tell us, in spite of their author's confounding trail of crumbs. "The things that are the most obvious and the most clear should never be forgotten," he said. "If you look at Richter's catalogue raisonné, you will see all the photo paintings. Suddenly, at the end, comes the largest painting"—the one of Ema descending the staircase nude. "He says himself that it's his wife, pregnant. Then you say, wait a minute, they're thirty-four, which is very late for that generation, and they'd been married forever. So what does that mean? And why is this the largest painting? Why does he paint it the moment she announced that she's pregnant, as if it's

a triumph over something?" With "Ema (Nude on a Staircase)," Richter broke into color, but afterward veered toward abstraction, producing a series of paintings based on color charts. "This must mean something," Donnersmarck said. "He's laying his life out. That's what triggered my story, that sudden change."

According to Donnersmarck, in order to elicit the most candor from Richter, he offered a strategy for presentation. When the time came, Donnersmarck wouldn't say what in the film was true and Richter wouldn't say what wasn't. While filming was under way, Donnersmarck wrote to Richter about his plans: "Whenever the conversation turns to

you, I will say that it is specifically not a bio-pic of Gerhard Richter but the story of the fictional painter Kurt Barnert. I will call the film something like a spiritual biography of our country, which was enriched by the biographies of other artists as well. I will say that the elements of your biography were merely the starting point for a free, fictionalized, story." He went on, "As for things that are shown in the movie because you told me about them and that are not commonly known anyway and matters of public record, I will of course continue to be silent about them. May the journalists speculate over what is truth and what is fiction!"

To me, Donnersmarck said, "Unless he decides to reveal something that's true, which under the arrangement is permissible, he can always hide behind the fact that I invented things, and I can always hide behind the fact that something invented could be true." The understanding was precarious—"a touchy matter," Donnersmarck said—but it had implicit safeguards. Richter could disown the film, and Donnersmarck could validate his sourcing. "All this information is from Richter," he explained. "He knows that I have all this incredibly sensitive stuff on tape. A lot of it involves his first wife, who's still alive, and has a right to privacy." (The former Ema Eufinger now runs a secondhand-clothing store in Düsseldorf and never discusses "Herr Richter.") "It's changed enough that one can say, 'Yes, this is the 'Citizen Kane' version,' but there are these very close proximities," he said.

Donnersmarck's hero, Kurt Barnert, has been profoundly affected by the death of his aunt, a psychiatric patient first sterilized and then murdered by the Nazis. At art school in Dresden, he falls in love with and marries a fellow-student, only to learn that her father, a former member of the S.S., is the doctor who presided over the aunt's treatment, condemning her to death with a flick of his red pencil. Terrifyingly, the father-in-law, who sees Barnert as genetically undesirable, performs an abortion on his own daughter in an attempt to drive the couple apart. Barnert assimilates these horrors, some of which he only partly grasps, into his paintings. In the film, Donnersmarck traps the

painter and his wife in an excruciating family dynamic for which art is the salve, the solution, and the way out.

**A**s a young artist, Richter was interested in the lottery: an everyday example of random elements acquiring unassailable significance. When Schreiber was researching the biography, Richter found his discoveries fascinating. He marvelled at the details of his father-in-law's S.S. past and, in particular, his participation in the sterilization program. Elger, the archivist, told me that Richter had coöperated closely with Schreiber, sharing unseen pictures and private family stories. "But after the book came out Richter was not so happy," Elger said. "Schreiber made it a crime story, made too much out of it. He made a lot of connections, put everything together. 'He lived on this street and—surprise, surprise—this other person lived only five streets away! At the same house number!'" Schreiber, apparently, had failed to discern the meaning of the lottery, and was mistaking every number for a winner.

Richter's provisional acceptance of interlopers, Donnersmarck believes, is

rooted in his practice as an artist and in his psychology. "He was both thrilled and shocked by Schreiber's book," Donnersmarck said. "Though he gave him quite a lot of access, he now considers him an enemy." Richter does not generally insist on propriety: he has painted, from magazine and newspaper images, murder victims, suicides, and Jackie Kennedy weeping at J.F.K.'s funeral. "He himself is so phenomenally indiscreet in his art—overstepping boundaries, overreaching," Donnersmarck said. "There's a German word, *übergriffig*, which means reaching into a space that isn't really yours. You know how some people just do not respect your space? It's usually people whose space was violated in a meaningful way. They don't recognize the difference between me and you, and just go right into your soul." He paused. "I think he felt that Jürgen Schreiber had gone a little too far."

Donnersmarck knew that he had to tread carefully when he began interviewing Richter. "All the factual information I was using was from Schreiber, and he knew that," he told me. "But he expressed such incredible anger at Schreiber that I had to pretend that it

came to me from the Holy Spirit. I was the Virgin Mary, impregnated by these facts out of nowhere."

For an artist like Richter, whose sources are deeply biographical, inviting others to collaborate on the story of his life may be both irresistible and highly dangerous. Donnersmarck read the screenplay to Richter, as he did to me; in his view, Richter, fraiser than when he had sat for the interviews, was profoundly moved. But he refused to go to a theatre to see the finished film. "He said, 'Can you send me the DVD?'" Donnersmarck recalled. "I said, 'No, I'll rent you a theatre. It's like me saying I want to see a painting of yours on a stamp.'"

The relationship, which started off with such unexpected warmth, chilled as Donnersmarck's project came to fruition. Schreiber, for one, was unsurprised. "Richter's reactions to my book and to the film are equal," he wrote to me. "First, he was happy and told me on the phone that a friend had told him, 'Now you have a biography like Picasso.' Later, he was complaining."

After receiving Richter's letter about "the case von Donnersmarck," I wrote to him again, hoping to understand what had happened. He replied:

What to say—very soon after his first or second visit I told him clearly that I would not approve of a movie about Gerhard Richter. I also suggested that the protagonist might have another profession, like a writer or a musician for example, as the family history that he wanted to tell did not necessarily need a painter as such. He left all his options open and I gave him something in writing stating that he was explicitly not allowed to use or publish either my name or any of my paintings. He reassured me to respect my wishes.

But in reality, he has done everything to link my name to his movie, and the press was helping him to the best of its ability. Fortunately, the most important newspapers here reviewed his concoction very skeptically and critically. Nevertheless, he managed to abuse and grossly distort my biography! I don't want to say more about this.

Elger told me, "I would say, after the Schreiber book, he makes the same mistake twice." He went on, "He's interested in things like this, maybe. Donnersmarck, he knows how to approach people. He's very smart, he's very gentle, like these film people are. They know how to get people to give them money. 'Donnersmarck, the Oscar winner, wants to talk to you.' He wrote this letter by



himself. Gerhard called him. They met. I don't really know why he let that in. He was so charming, Donnersmarck, so Gerhard felt he was betrayed by his charm." Elger, with a note of finality, told me that he would purchase a copy of the DVD for the archive. Case closed.

Sometimes Donnersmarck's children play "What superpower would you most want to have?" The children wish that they could fly, or walk through walls, or turn invisible. No, he tells them, the only superpower you really need is the ability to read minds.

Interviewing Richter, Donnersmarck felt that he was coming close to a profound truth, and also that Moritz, Richter's wife, might at any moment cut him off. He wished he could overhear their evening debriefing, in order to understand his prospects for continuing. One night, after leaving Richter, Donnersmarck turned on his phone and found a voice mail from him: a pocket dial. He listened to the sound of Richter walking down the corridor, calling his dog, Leica, and then sitting down with his wife and telling her about the day's interview. It was as close to wiretapping the confession booth as Donnersmarck could hope to get, and, he says, it confirmed for him that his insight into Richter's story was sound.

When I met up with Donnersmarck for lunch in Los Angeles, in December, and asked what he had heard Richter say, he told me, "That is truly fruit of the poisonous tree." He was preparing for the film's American release and hunting for a new house. The family had been based in Munich, with the kids accompanying Donnersmarck on location, while he made the film. He looked rested—trim, with his hair now darker and tamed. "Even though it was wonderful and very useful fruit, even though it made it possible for me to continue interviews with him for a very long time, because I had a ten times better counterargument against anything his wife was objecting to." Now that he feels Richter turning against him, the recording is a comfort to his conscience.

When I told him what Richter had written, that he had explicitly objected to the film's being about a painter, Donnersmarck was taken aback. Richter had

listened to the screenplay, and even raised the possibility of making the paintings for the film himself—a notion that Donnersmarck, imagining long delays and the nightmare of insuring millions of dollars' worth of original art, had declined. (Richter denies making this suggestion.) Instead, Donnersmarck hired one of Richter's former assistants to re-create key works. It was a pity, he said, that I had not been able to get Richter to open up to me more, show the real self he had revealed during their interviews. What he was doing now was obfuscating, an octopus in a cloud of ink. "I thought he would simply stay quiet publicly, based on our agreement about the facts," Donnersmarck told me. "And, you'll note, he stayed very quiet on all of that. But then he found the loophole of talking about the trailer, which is almost a little funny. The regrets and the remorse are—mostly—part of that game, I think."

At a public event not long ago, Donnersmarck told the audience, "Any work that resonates in some way can only be autobiographical. It just comes in different crypto-forms." Only once the film came out was the hazard of the arrangement between Donnersmarck and Richter laid bare. Just as photographs replace and alter memories—a transubstantiation that Richter complicates in his photo paintings—so, too, do films tend to replace facts. The details that Richter had shared with Donnersmarck, and those he had gleaned from Schreiber's biography, made the inventions seem real. "So many details were taken from his history, and on the other side there were so many things that were alternative facts, as you say in the States," Elger said. "If you have fifty per cent historical details from Richter's life, you think the others are true. You can't differentiate between what is true and what is not true."

In a Richter-like gesture, Donnersmarck had freighted the film with hidden meaning. "I put in a lot of what computer-game programmers call Easter eggs, things only he would be able to decipher, little love letters to him," he told me. "It's too bad he didn't see it, but

I can understand it a little bit. If I imagine someone taking my life story and putting a spin on it, either it would be super-painful, because it would be so close to these painful chapters in my life, or it would be painful because it was not close enough." Richter's story was complex and difficult; Donnersmarck could not truly fault him for wanting to

maintain control of it. He said, "Maybe the film is for everybody except him."

Donnersmarck and I exchanged many letters in the next few weeks. He wanted to make sure that I had his motivations straight—that his goal was to exalt Richter, not to diminish him. "If my film did not portray him as the hero, I would feel on morally problematic territory," he told me. "It does portray him as a hero. Wouldn't you say?"

Charting the underpinnings of one's own creative impulses is a murky, perhaps counterproductive, business. That's what interpreters—journalists, biographers, filmmakers, shrinks—are for. "It's impossible to do it for your own work," Donnersmarck told me at lunch. "Even Richter can't do it for his own work. That's why he wants Schreiber and me. In a certain way, I'm being his analyst. And he's the kind of patient who can get super pissed-off at his analysts. In a way, the fact that he gets so super pissed-off at us shows that we're pointing toward something correct. I think he's kind of, in a weird way, addicted to this type of analysis."

In the course of verifying details of his life for this piece, Richter declined to entertain Donnersmarck's ideas about the significance of the *Ema* painting. "I'll leave that to the art historians to figure out," he said. He did allow that *Ema*'s father had been her gynecologist, and that there were mysteries and rumors around the treatment that he provided her. But that, he said, was not his story to tell. As for his time with Donnersmarck, Richter had not enjoyed hearing the screenplay read aloud. The only part of the encounters he took pleasure in was the tactful, penetrating questioning of the interviews. That had touched him deeply. Richter said, "He was like a psychoanalyst." ♦



A REPORTER AT LARGE

## ISLAND SONG

*A muzzled pop star confronts Hong Kong's new political reality.*

BY JIAYANG FAN

**O**n a spring morning at a concert hall in Toronto, Denise Ho, a queen of the Hong Kong genre known as Cantopop, prepared to appease the gods. Posters on either side of the stage door advertised her tour through Canada, where she spent her formative years, and California. An entourage of assistants and stagehands scurried around unloading speakers, costume bags, and equipment cases. Ho, a lean, athletic-looking woman of forty-one, wore a green bomber jacket and hiking boots. Her face was set in a steely expression of self-possession and purposefulness, which gave her the appearance of a cross between a soldier and a minor Buddhist deity.

Ho walked to a table, just outside the door, that was covered with a bright-red cloth. She ignited a few sticks of incense and bowed her head. The practice was a pre-performance custom common in Cantonese opera, a vernacular music tradition that is one of Cantopop's precursors: artists call on the heavens for protection and appeal to the local spirits to forgive any disturbance that the performance might cause.

Ho said that she doesn't believe in God, but that the spiritual element of life is important to her. "Rituals are different from belief," she told me, and this ceremony was "an homage to the past, and performed out of respect rather than fear." Since meeting the Dalai Lama, in 2016, she has taken to burning sage to "purify the energy" around her. The acrid scent follows her wherever she goes.

If a sense of the spiritual anchors Ho's personal life, it is her political convictions that have come to define her public persona. Six years ago, she became the first major female star in Hong Kong to come out as gay, a significant move in a society that remains culturally conservative. Then, in 2014, during what became known as the Umbrella

Revolution—protesters held up umbrellas as a protection against teargas—she joined thousands of people demonstrating against Beijing's encroachments on the autonomy of Hong Kong. (In 1842, China ceded Hong Kong Island to the British, who gave it back with additional territory in 1997, in an agreement that secures certain privileges of self-governance for the territory.)

At the protests, Ho and a number of other Cantopop singers performed a song, "Raise the Umbrella," that became the anthem of the movement. In the third month of demonstrations, she was arrested. The footage of her being led away by police furnished one of the enduring images of the protests. On the Chinese mainland, where Ho had been a burgeoning star, and where most of her income came from, she became persona non grata. State media outlets called her "a poison of Hong Kong," and one editorial warned that the mainland sales Ho depended on were far from guaranteed: "Don't think you can eat our food and smash our pots at the same time." Since then, her music has been rigorously purged from streaming platforms in China, and she is banned from having a social-media presence there. As Beijing chips away at Hong Kong's freedoms, Ho has become an emblematic figure of the territory—embattled, emboldened, and unbehoden.

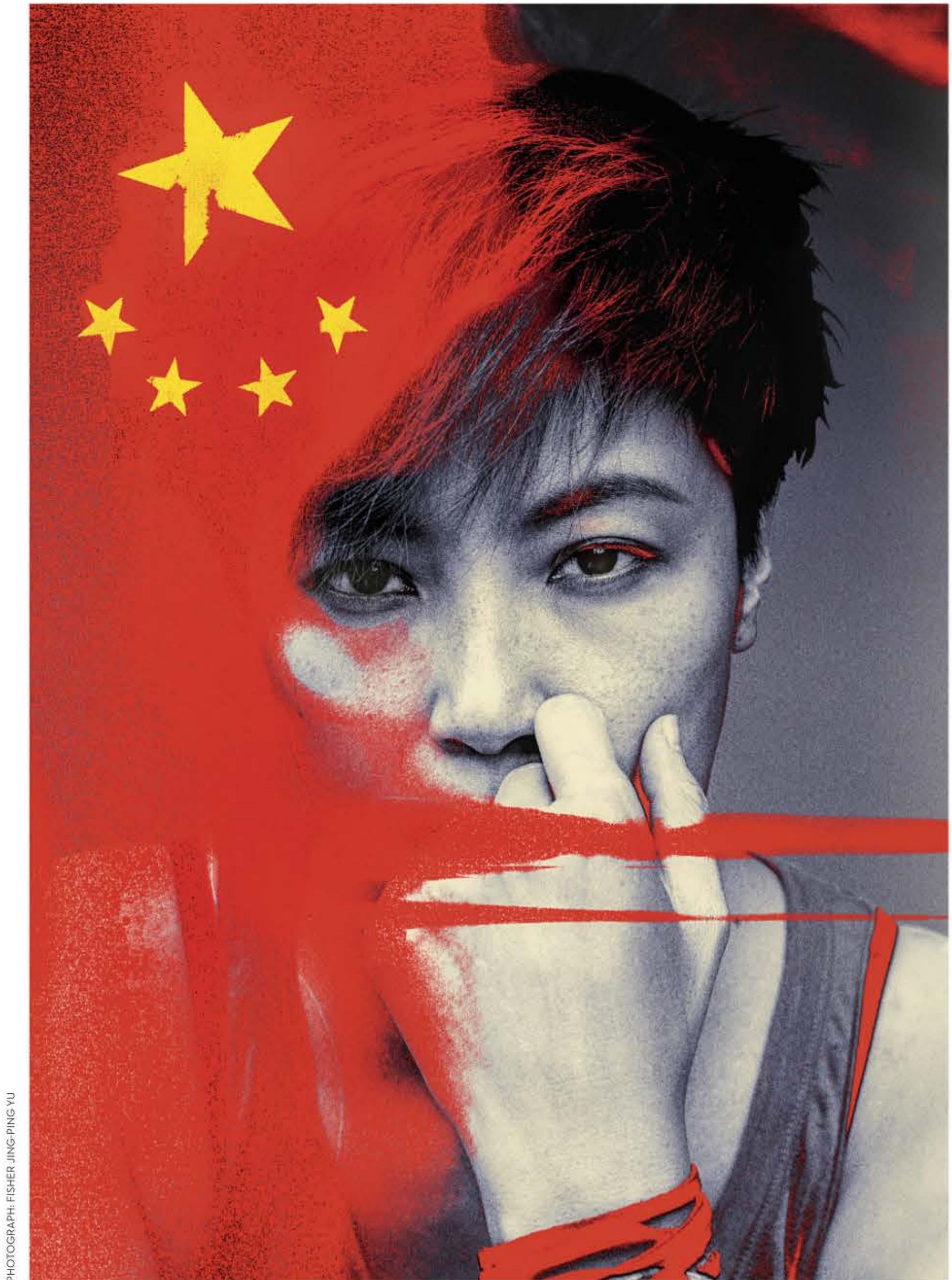
In person, Ho can be pensive, introverted, even awkward, but something inside her is released once she walks onstage. At the Toronto concert, when the stage lights came up, the outline of her silhouette materialized, to feral applause and hoots. Her slender frame, clad in a khaki trenchcoat and shiny black ankle boots, seemed to fill the stage, as she pranced around her microphone stand, the drums, and the backup vocalists, like a mischievous child hamming it up and pretending not

to know that she's being watched.

Cantopop is often dismissed as mass-produced pabulum. Many of the genre's songs, slickly manufactured for a swooning teen audience, lean heavily on idealized, treacly romance—a litany of bad breakups and hopeless crushes. The performers are often Bambi-eyed maidens and clean-cut swains who have not necessarily been recruited for their vocal gifts. But the music can be almost lethally catchy, and perfecting the genre's blend of Western-style melodic lines, Eastern-style pentatonic ones, and electronic disco beats requires skill. Songwriting in Cantonese, the dominant language of Hong Kong and Guangdong Province, presents particular challenges. Chinese languages are tonal—the same phoneme has different meanings depending on how it rises or falls—and Cantonese has many more tones than Mandarin, the dominant language of the mainland. Writing a melody that fits the contour of a sentence, or finding words to fit a preexisting melody, is notoriously difficult.

Cantopop's influence extends far beyond Hong Kong. For a generation or more, it was a leading pop genre across Asia—with sizable followings not only on the mainland but also in Korea, Japan, and Southeast Asia. And, in spite of the music's more formulaic features, its greatest stars have managed to shape striking personas and produce songs of real expressive power. Denise Ho is one of them. Her songs often twist Cantopop's formulas in audacious ways, and her voice, though agile in the silvery high register favored by female performers, can shift within a few beats to a forceful, earthy contralto that seems to issue straight from her solar plexus.

At the end of the Toronto performance, Ho stood at the edge of the stage and addressed her fans. This was



PHOTOGRAPH: FISHER JING-PING YU

*After Denise Ho joined Hong Kong's pro-democracy protests, her music disappeared in mainland China.*



the first time she had performed in North America since her politics had derailed her career. "In the past three years, a lot of things happened," she said. The mood in the hall shifted, and the people next to me set down their beers and hunched forward. "I can no longer be a simple singer like I was in the past," Ho continued. "I actually took a pause in writing. But, at the beginning of this year, I suddenly felt that it was time to re-start the creative process." She cleared her throat. Her eyes shone. "I believe in the power of creation—even in times as dire as these."

In "Seeking," a memoir Ho wrote just before she turned forty, she considers the distinction between "home" and "roots," and suggests that the latter are more malleable than most people assume. "Like resilient plants, people's roots regenerate over time," she said. But the place that feels to her most like home is a stone-façade house in a

suburb of Montreal, where her family lived after moving from Hong Kong, in 1988, when she was eleven. Her parents eventually sold the house and moved back to Hong Kong, in order to be closer to her, but she has vowed that she will buy it the next time it comes on the market, regardless of where she happens to be living.

"I make a pilgrimage every time I'm in Montreal," she told me as we stood outside the house, the morning after she performed a concert in the city. The branches of a Japanese lilac swayed in the front yard, and Ho pointed to her bedroom window. Her parents and her brother, who had come from Hong Kong for the tour, were making the pilgrimage, too. Ho's mother, Janny, wore jeans covered in street-art-style designs; her father, Henry, whom Ho closely resembles, made a clown face when she held up her phone to take a picture. A young woman pushing a stroller passed, and then an older cou-

ple, hand in hand. A few yards past the house, the man turned around and called out, "Henry, is that you?"

The man, a retired lawyer named Hugues Nadon, was the father of a childhood friend of Ho's who had lived a couple of doors down. There were hugs and recollections of holidays and hockey practices, and Ho slipped in and out of French, the Nadons' first language. She mentioned that her concert the night before had been at the assembly hall of a Catholic school, the same place where, at fifteen, she performed for the first time. She had ended her program with "Montreal," a song that celebrates the city that taught her "how to be a person." "My values, my sense of independence, my principles, my penchant for rebellion—they all took root here," she said.

The Nadons had heard about Ho's arrest. "We were worried about you," Hugues said. "Are you doing O.K.?"

"It's better now," Ho replied, and then became mock-serious: "But if I ever have to take refuge in Montreal—

"I don't have my law license anymore, but I am always happy to advise and help," he said with a broad smile.

Ho's parents, both educators, were born in Hong Kong, to families who had come from China prior to the Communist takeover. After Mao Zedong took power, in 1949, Hong Kong's proximity made it a popular destination for refugees. For a while, some hundred thousand people were arriving each month. The population more than doubled, and by the early sixties fewer than half of Hong Kong's residents had been born there. As that generation came of age, growing up in the shadow of famine and Maoist purges occurring as close as a few miles away, the island transformed itself into a financial hub. A distinctive Hong Kong culture emerged: hybridized, outward-looking, and entrepreneurial. Resentment of the British colonial presence persisted, but was increasingly overtaken by apprehension about the return to Chinese rule, which was dictated by the terms of a lease that Britain signed with China in 1898. Like many of their Cantonese-speaking peers, Henry and Janny were more fluent in English than in Mandarin, and harbored a deep-seated distrust of the Chinese government.

Denise was born in 1977, and for much of her youth it seemed that she would always be eclipsed by her brother, Harris, who is two years older. Harris, a conservatory-trained musician who now writes music for his sister and other Hong Kong performers, was playing the piano at the age of four; when Denise tried the piano, around the same age, she couldn't even sit still for her first lesson. Just before the family emigrated—"We didn't want to live in a place where the future is ominous and uncertain," Henry told me—they took their first vacation to the mainland, to visit the Great Wall and other historical landmarks. "The purpose of the trip was so that we could be acquainted with our roots, so we could find a point of connection to the place we came from," Ho said. But to her nine-year-old eyes the mainland cities were grim spectacles of poverty and backwardness. Her main memory is of sitting on a tour bus as a shirtless man hawked pork buns on the side of the road. "There was so much dirt and car exhaust. I could see the layers of dust just settling on those buns, which had no covering, and people bought them and ate them all the same. I remember thinking then, What does dust taste like? And why did these people, people who looked so sensible—grandparents, mothers and fathers with their young children—why didn't they mind?"

Another excursion shortly before the move to the West was to a concert by Anita Mui, a Cantopop diva known as the Madonna of the East. For Ho, seeing Mui perform was life-changing. "I was obsessed with her," she said, and recalled that every week in Montreal she would write fan letters and take a bus for an hour and a half to Chinatown to flip through entertainment magazines for news of her idol. Ho learned to sing Mui's songs and other Cantopop hits, and started performing regularly, sometimes with her brother.

In 1996, when she was about to go to college, she entered Hong Kong's New Talent Singing Awards, an annual televised contest on TVB, Hong Kong's equivalent of the BBC. She'd discovered that Mui was to be a judge that year and hoped to meet her. Mui

had been the first-ever winner, fourteen years before, and since then the show had become a powerful engine in TVB's star factory. Ho ended up winning first prize and then faced a decision: stay in the liberal atmosphere of Canada or pursue a career in Hong Kong, on the eve of the handover to China. "I knew that, with a face like mine, I couldn't be a mainstream star in Canada or America," she told me. "But in Hong Kong I knew I had a chance."

Like Ho, I fell in love with Anita Mui in the late eighties, when I glimpsed her on the cover of a cassette that my mother had borrowed from a co-worker. We were living in the sooty mainland city of Chongqing, where dust was a condition of life, even inside the Army hospital where my mother worked as a pulmonologist.

My mother did not quite approve of Mui, whose minidresses and hip gyrations onstage violated her sense of female propriety; this was the sort of thing that the Communist Party deemed "spiritually polluting." But, of course, that was also what made Mui so tantalizing to a citizenry fed a diet of *aiguo gequ* ("patriotic songs"), which played ceaselessly on the radio and over public loudspeakers.

When I was three, there was one I especially loved, "Bloodstained Glory." It had been written to commemorate the Chinese soldiers who died during the Sino-Vietnamese War, but I had no sense of this at the time. I knew

but discreetly. She embodied our private dream of a land where people were indisputably Chinese but lived a life that we could barely imagine. Hong Kong—literally, "fragrant harbor"—connoted less a physical place than a way of being. When I listened to Cantopop, I daydreamed about being a starlet swathed in mink, riding in a polished convertible past soaring glass buildings. The Hong Kong movies that we watched on television had the effect of making us suddenly aware of our raggedness. Seeing other Chinese people enjoy the kind of modernity that we had come to associate with foreigners (also from television), we could no longer tell ourselves that Chinese people could not live that way. And yet none of us would ever get to go there. Cantopop was a luxurious, impossible fantasy—something you wanted not just to sing along to but somehow to possess and swim inside.

If, as a child, I had been able to visit Ho's office in Hong Kong, on a block of sagging gray warehouses in one of the city's industrial zones, I might have been less impressed. When I arrived one June morning, a few weeks after her North American tour, Ho was examining herself with detached objectivity in a floor-to-ceiling mirror, wearing what appeared to be an haute-couture hemp sack—a prospective costume for the video of a new song. She conferred with two women—a film director and a costume designer—while her girlfriend scurried around with a camera.

Ho nodded briefly in my direction, smiling, then quickly resumed her rapid-fire critique of the costume options. She has three full-time employees, but likes to have a hand in every aspect of her projects. Later, when she was distractedly rummaging through the office to find one of her older albums for me, I asked if there was someone else I could bother. "There's no point," she said. "Things have to go through me anyway."

Ho learned to do everything on her own out of necessity. When she first returned to Hong Kong, her career languished. TVB's stable of rising stars was dominated by beauty queens, and Ho, though attractive, already had a somewhat androgynous edge that



only one line—"Grieve not, the soil of our Republic contains the love we have given!"—and warbled it repeatedly in front of adults who had long grown tired of the song. (One prominent performer who sang it, Peng Liyuan, had recently married a vice-mayor named Xi Jinping.)

Anita Mui was someone you listened to at home—not quite secretly

didn't fit the mold. "I was all, like, O.K., here I am, I'm ready to make a record! But nobody really knew what to do with me," she said. To get by, she took jobs hosting television shows and playing minor roles in serial dramas. "I wanted to be taken seriously as a singer, and they were putting me on these side gigs," she continued. "Finally, they gave me a song, and it ended up being a kids' song based on a cartoon character. I was so angry I ended up singing it as if it was hardcore rock." Released in 1997, the song became a surprise hit.

Encouraged, she sent a demo tape to Mui, who was impressed enough to take her on as an apprentice. Working as Mui's songwriter and performing with her onstage raised Ho's profile, and she absorbed something of her mentor's fearlessness. Mui, an unconventional-looking but deeply sensual

performer, from a hardscrabble background, was also an ardent pro-democracy campaigner. After the Tiananmen Square crackdown, in 1989, she had spoken in support of the protesters and given money to a covert network smuggling dissidents to safety.

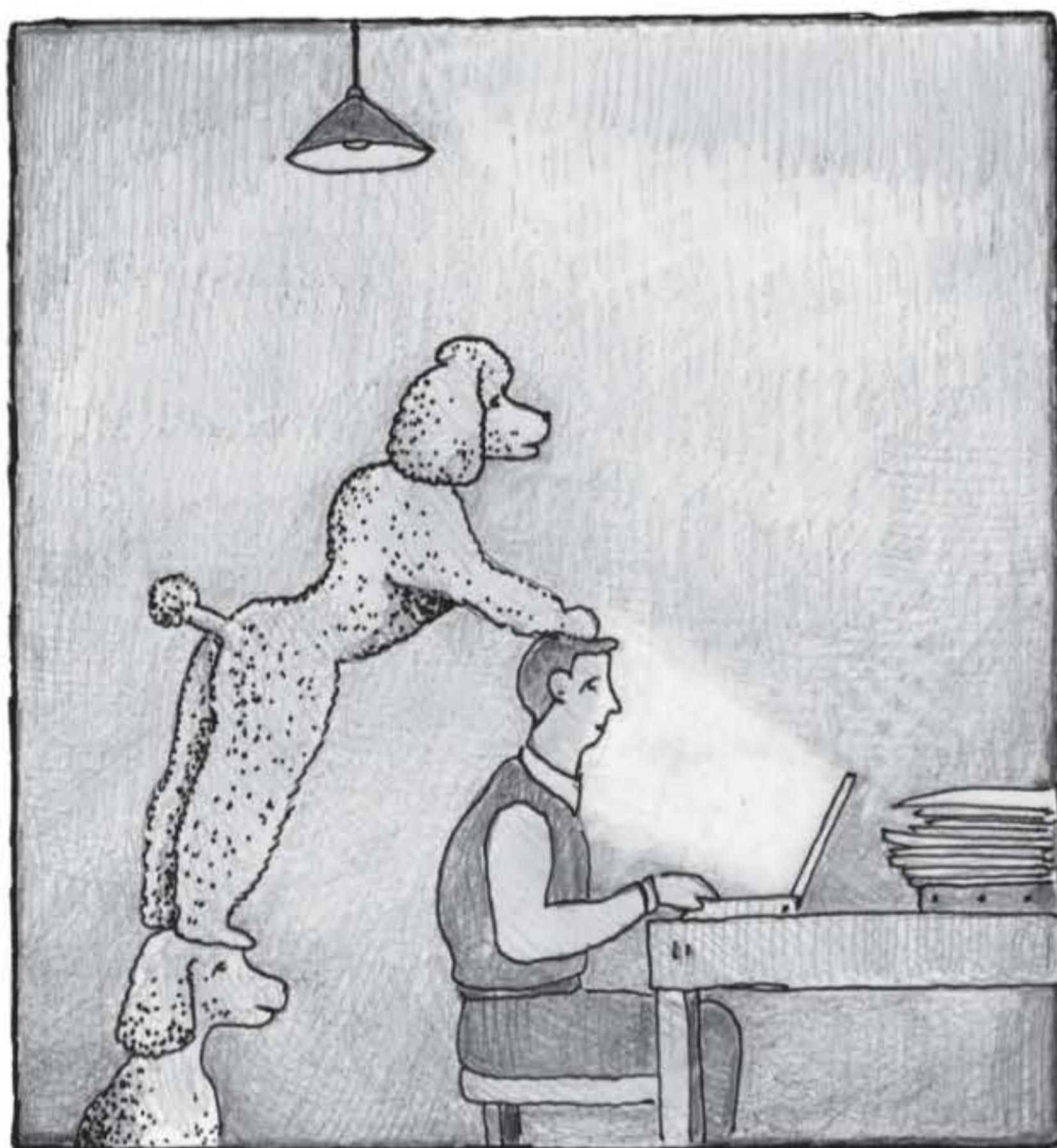
The years with Mui shaped the way that Ho was seen, even after Mui died of cancer, in 2003, at the age of forty—a loss that for Hong Kongers was like the deaths of Princess Diana and of Michael Jackson rolled into one. Critics were quick to label Ho's style as *linglei*, meaning "alternative," a designation that she finds wryly amusing. "It only goes to show how narrow Hong Kong's music offerings are," she said. "Only in an environment where everyone is so nice and alike do I stand out so glaringly."

Ho quickly became one of the most prominent figures on the Hong Kong

music scene, winning awards and releasing chart-topping songs with a succession of major record companies. She also established herself as one of a growing number of Cantopop artists experimenting with the form. One of the songs that she sang in Toronto was "Louis and Lawrence," a ballad with a haunted, melancholic melody that was written for a rock musical that Ho produced in 2005, based on a legend of the Jin dynasty, the *Butterfly Lovers*—China's "Romeo and Juliet," more or less. Ho's version plays up the gender-bending themes of the classic tale: the heroine dresses as a man in order to gain access to an imperial school, from which women are barred, and falls in love with a fellow-scholar. He reciprocates her feelings, without realizing that she is a woman. "To me, China's most famous love story is also a gay story," Ho told me.

In 2008, she set up her own studio, in part to have the freedom to take on commercially risky projects that addressed social issues. Her album from the same year, "Ten Days in the Madhouse," was intended to highlight the issue of mental illness, still a somewhat taboo subject in Hong Kong. And although she also courted fame on the mainland, she refused to soft-pedal her convictions. When she released her first album in Mandarin, one of the songs, "Wintersweet Blossoms in Siberia," was dedicated to the imprisoned dissident Liu Xiaobo.

When Ho and I talked about her career, I asked how Beijing's displeasure had affected her professional life. "People thought that I couldn't make it after what happened," she said. "They came up to my parents and asked if I could survive." It hadn't been easy, she admitted, but she'd learned to approach managing her own career as a creative challenge. Unable to find a corporate backer for a concert series at the Hong Kong Coliseum, she launched a campaign to get local businesses to sponsor the event. Three hundred companies signed on, and all fifty thousand tickets sold out within hours. The loyalty of her fans had a political dimension. In 2016, after the cosmetics company Lancôme cancelled a concert featuring Ho, Hong Kongers boycotted its products, furious that a major



I SOON BEGAN TO NOTICE THE DOWNSIDE  
OF WORKING IN A SHARED OFFICE SPACE

corporation would “kowtow” to Beijing. Protesters marched on Lancôme’s stores, forcing every outlet in Hong Kong to temporarily close.

I wondered if becoming an avatar of the Umbrella Movement had made Ho contemplate going into politics. She drew a deep breath. “For a while, I really thought about it,” she said. “I bought books about politics and the way the political system worked. I studied, evaluated, and analyzed myself. But the more I learned about politics the more aggravated I became.” She seemed unsatisfied with how she’d expressed the idea, and switched from English to Mandarin. “It’s like this: it’s the job of politicians to learn to think inside certain constraints and do moral calculations,” she said. “I realized that I was not suited to that game.”

“We have always been defined by our utility to greater powers,” Benny Tai, one of the leaders of the 2014 protests, told me. Tai, a law professor at the University of Hong Kong, explained that Hong Kong had been nothing more than a sparsely populated fishing village until its geographic position became strategically important to nineteenth-century British traders eager to access the vast Chinese market. After defeating the enfeebled Qing dynasty in the First Opium War, Britain took over the island and made it a crown colony. The British set up free markets, a free press, a legislature, independent courts, and a stock market. Over time, the native population absorbed many of the colonizers’ customs. “We were essentially raised British but would not be of British stock,” Tai said. Hong Kong, born of this unusual colonial encounter, was never expected to grow up into something that might want to shape itself. In that sense, the democracy movement was a necessary development that had arrived at an unfavorable time. “From a semi-democratic state, Hong Kong has transformed into a semi-authoritarian state,” he observed.

While I was in Hong Kong, I met with Joshua Wong and Nathan Law, who had emerged as leaders in the protests when they were eighteen and twenty-one, respectively. Both of them later served jail time for their involve-



*“The couple asked some friends to read poems that have special meaning to them, so we now invite them up to read whatever they found on the Internet this morning.”*

ment. We went to a bistro next to Hong Kong’s Central Government Complex, where the protests began and the fiercest clashes between police and demonstrators occurred. From our table, I could see the flags of the People’s Republic of China and of the Hong Kong Special Administrative Region, as the territory is officially known, flying side by side at the building that houses Hong Kong’s parliamentary body, the Legislative Council.

Two years after the protests, Wong and Law founded a new political party, Demosistō. In the Legislative Council elections that year, Law became the youngest candidate ever to win a seat, but he was disqualified from serving after he used the oath-taking ceremony to protest Beijing’s influence. Demosistō’s main goals, they told me, were to insure Hong Kong’s right to self-determination and to push for democratic reform establishing “one person, one vote.” Currently, only half the Legislative Council’s members are elected by individual voters; the other half are elected mostly by business and trade associations. In every election, the sys-

tem has produced a majority for pro-Beijing parties, although most of the population votes for pro-democracy parties. “Hong Kong has never been allowed to be a real democracy, before or after 1997,” Wong said. “What we want is for the people of Hong Kong to figure out for themselves how they want to live.”

Most of Hong Kong’s political disputes involve the idea of “one country, two systems,” a principle devised by Deng Xiaoping in the eighties. As the end of British rule approached, it was used as a way of harmonizing the Communist mainland with capitalist, multiparty Hong Kong. In negotiations with the British, the concept was formalized into specific stipulations, eventually enshrined in the Basic Law, Hong Kong’s mini-constitution. The Basic Law guarantees “a high degree of autonomy” to Hong Kong’s legislature, judiciary, and executive branch, as well as freedom of speech, association, the press, and demonstration. But it also states that Hong Kong is an “inalienable” part of the People’s Republic, and it grants the right to interpret the Basic

Law not only to Hong Kong's courts but also to Beijing—a potential back door to more direct control.

Wong and Law said that their greatest current concern is Article 23 of the Basic Law, which says that Hong Kong must enact laws to "prohibit any act of treason, secession, sedition, subversion against the Central People's Government." Democracy activists worry that the article will be used to outlaw important areas of free speech and political expression. Last fall, the Hong Kong government formally banned a fringe pro-independence party on the ground that it threatened national security and spread "hatred and discrimination against mainland Chinese." There has been long-standing pressure from Beijing for Hong Kong to pass national-security laws, which democracy campaigners see as symptomatic of China's resolve to suppress separatism in territories such as Xinjiang and Tibet. Half a million people protested on the streets when such a bill was proposed in 2003. Wong and Law believe that there will be another attempt in the next three to five years.

"In the short term, it's hard not to be pessimistic, to feel a real helplessness," Law said. "But in the long term I am an optimist. It's an optimism born out of something akin to religious faith that Hong Kong will one day decide its own fate." Both men mentioned a generational aspect to people's changing attitudes. "In terms of identity, our parents feel Chinese in their blood, but, for us, declaring our Chineseness has unavoidable political associations," Wong said. "We don't recognize ourselves to be Chinese in that way, because we have no loyalty to the Communist Party." Law called his parents "very traditional, old-school Chinese" and said that they'd initially objected to his political activism: "Hong Kong never felt fully theirs the way it feels like it is ours."

If you grew up in mainland China, there's something disorienting about being in Hong Kong. At first, it seems like you're in just another big Chinese city: all the signs are in Chinese characters, the food stalls hawk familiar fare, and the streets are full of people who look like you. But then you notice the

## I GIVE IN TO AN OLD DESIRE

I lost so much  
of the world's beauty, as if I were watching  
every shining gift  
on its branch with one eye. Because  
I was hungry. Because I was waiting  
to eat, a self  
crawling about the  
world in search  
of small things. I remember a small thing, my mother's hat,  
a tea  
hat or cocktail  
hat that sat on top of her  
perfect face—petals, perhaps  
peonies, flaming out, like  
the pink feathers of some exotic

lancet windows of the city's Victorian-gothic cathedral, and the British street names: Chancery Lane, Bristol Avenue, Fenwick Street. The people you meet have names like Audrey, Arthur, and Henry. To be someone of Chinese descent who speaks Mandarin and English but not Cantonese is to experience a double foreignness, and two subtly different kinds of suspicion: if I spoke English, I was assumed to be a Westerner, which meant being treated with wary deference but also being outrageously overcharged; speaking Mandarin was worse, eliciting a distrust that bordered on contempt.

China's economic power has led to a huge influx of mainlanders—not just tourists but people who come to buy real estate, study, give birth, or have medical procedures. Given China's vast consumer base, locals increasingly fear being outspent. They also complain that their orderly, law-abiding culture is being eroded by uncouth, rapacious visitors. When arguments break out, Hong Kongers call the mainlanders locusts, and the mainlanders dismiss the locals as lapdogs of the British. A few years ago, there was a scuffle in a

shopping district after a toddler from the mainland urinated in the street and, along with his parents, was surrounded by an angry crowd. The incident became an online sensation, with commenters polarized over whether it was the parents or the crowd who had behaved unacceptably.

Twice, after getting into a cab and speaking in Mandarin, I was berated for not putting on my seat belt, even though I'd already done so. The second time, the driver yelled at me every few minutes, ignoring my assurance that the belt was on. When he eventually looked around and checked, he uttered a long "oh" but stopped short of an apology. "Mainlanders usually don't like to put on seat belts," he said, adding pointedly, "But here in Hong Kong we do it, because it's the law."

It was true that in Beijing or Shanghai I'd rarely seen anyone wearing a seat belt. It was also likely that my drivers had suffered their fair share of peremptory mainlanders who brazenly defied regulations. Truth be told, it had felt slightly odd to me to be in a city full of Chinese people where you nonetheless never saw anyone

bird. Her mother had been a cook in the South. She grew up in the home of wealthy white people. Hesitant toward her own beauty, unable to protect mine, there were things she never talked about. She said silence was a balm. It sat on top of her head, something of exaltation and wonder exploding from the inside like a woman in orgasm. One artificial flower I have desired to write about for years.

—*Toi Derricotte*

walking against a red light. Still, it was a shock to realize that simply speaking Mandarin was enough to mark me out as trouble.

I mentioned this to Helen Siu, a Hong Kong native who is an anthropology professor at Yale, as we ambled along Hollywood Road, the second-oldest street on the island. She pointed to a short, broad tree whose branches of butterfly-shaped leaves drooped to form a rounded canopy. “The bauhinia is Hong Kong’s emblem,” she told me—not only because of the magnificence of its magenta blossoms in the spring but because it is a hybrid. All twenty-five thousand trees in the city are believed to have come from a single specimen discovered by a French Catholic missionary. The tree is not capable of propagating itself, and owes its continued existence to a process of cultivation: cutting, layering, and grafting. Siu grinned at the almost too neat analogy and said, “No one here could ever claim very deep roots.”

The topic of Hong Kong’s identity—what it consists of, how it is changing—came up in almost every

conversation I had there. Siu spoke of the island as a multiethnic space that had been improvised and reinvented throughout its history. She believes that southern China, being coastal, has always been culturally porous. By contrast, the political center in the landlocked north has consistently striven to unify and homogenize—from the late third century B.C., when a former Qin-dynasty general conquered the region and founded the Kingdom of Nanyue, to President Xi Jinping’s current “sinicization” drive in the country’s ethnic regions.

We reached Man Mo Temple, one of the oldest buildings on the island, whose low, green-tiled roof and ornate granite columns looked strange amid the surrounding crush of skyscrapers. The temple was built in 1847, and in the ensuing decades the site, low-lying and prone to epidemics, became the heart of Hong Kong’s Chinese community. “Hong Kong was a very vertical city,” Siu said as we climbed a hill. “The Europeans lived up there”—she pointed—“and the Chinese were working by the waterfront. Imagine if this was a summer

day in the late nineteenth century. We’d see the rich passing us by, sitting in sedan chairs, being carried by barebacked laborers to their posh residence.” The hierarchy remains: the incalculably expensive neighborhoods up the hill are occupied by the international rich, including many wealthy mainlanders; when we walked back down the hill, we saw a large group of Filipino and Indonesian maids on their day off, eating and playing cards on mats improvised from cardboard boxes.

Shortly before the Hong Kong handover, in 1997, my mother and I took a trip back to the mainland, which we’d left for America a few years earlier. Anticipation of the territory’s return “to the bosom of the motherland” was palpable. Party leaders had long made a point of referring to Hong Kong as *tongbao*—born of “the same womb” as the rest of China. Now a commemorative song, “A.D. 1997,” performed by some of the mainland’s biggest stars, played incessantly on the radio. In the song, Hong Kong is cast as a lost loved one: “A hundred years ago, I watched, helpless, as you slipped away/A hundred years later, I wait anxiously for you to return to my side.”

But what happens if you are actually reunited with a lost relative? How well will you know each other and how happy will you be? The “pained parting” that the song mourned had a special resonance in my family. My father was born to peasants in Shanxi, one of the poorest provinces in China, and was the fourth of six surviving children. By the time my grandmother gave birth to the sixth, China was in the middle of the Great Famine, which killed some thirty million people, and the family was eating tree bark to survive. Fortunately, a well-off couple in the village, both schoolteachers, had just found out that they could not have children, so a mutually beneficial solution suggested itself. The teachers received the child they had longed for, and my father’s parents received two bushels of grain.

The fact that the child, a girl, had effectively been sold was a source of shame in a culture where blood ties and ancestry are sacred. The remaining children understood that they were fortunate to have been “kept,” but they

wondered what exactly this good fortune consisted of. What was so lucky about toiling in the fields with hardly anything to fill your stomach while your youngest sister ate three meals a day and got to stay in school? They viewed her with a curious mixture of envy and pity—envy of her material comfort, pity for her lack of legitimacy. Once, when things were particularly desperate, my father asked if he, too, could be sold.

I met my youngest aunt when I was seven. I called her Xiao Gugu—“little aunt”—but it was obvious that she was different. She had pale skin unmarked by the sun, smelled faintly of scented soap, and had a soft-spoken manner that made my other two aunts seem coarse. Xiao Gugu never hid her connection to the Fan family, but, three decades on, she had grown into a person with new allegiances that she refused to hide. She didn’t consider herself part of the clan, and saw no reason to observe the rituals of filial piety, such as visiting the ancestral home on holidays and kowtowing to my grandmother. My aunts and uncles felt slighted by her indifference to the family bond: perhaps she’d been spoiled by her life of plenty and lacked the moral fibre that tougher lives had bred in them.

We mainlanders had a similar reaction to the Hong Kong that we saw in the movies and music videos of the eighties. A life so pampered, while enviable and thrilling, was also morally suspect, reeking of bourgeois individualism and other Western frivolities, such as democracy. In the decades since the handover, mainlanders who once eagerly anticipated the return of Hong Kong have visited this other China and been shunned the moment they open their mouths. The long-lost relatives have been reunited only to find that they have little in common.

One evening, I had dinner with Ho and her friend Anthony Wong, one of the singers with whom she performed “Raise the Umbrella” in 2014. He was also one of the first Cantopop stars to come out as gay, doing so six

months before she did. We met up at a fusion restaurant whose offerings—“house-cured citrus salmon,” “cardamom French toast”—wouldn’t have seemed out of place in Williamsburg. It was in the Sai Wan district, part of the low-lying area to which Chinese residents were historically confined. “My grandparents lived here, and I lived with them for a while when I was young,” Wong said, as we sat down. As a child, he loved sneaking into the neighborhood’s traditional Cantonese opera houses.

Like Ho, he has suffered professional repercussions for his political stance—within six months of the protests, job offers had completely dried up—but the pair share a wry fatalism. When I asked whom they were friends with in the entertainment business, she looked at him and laughed: “Do we even have any? These days, we’re more like outcasts!”

Wong is older than Ho—in his mid-fifties, although with a face so babyish that his thin goatee comes as a surprise—and spoke about the early years of Cantopop. “I was a teen-ager in the seventies and still remember what it was like to hear Sam Hui singing in Cantonese,” he said, referring to the singer chiefly credited with pioneering the genre. “Before then, everyone was listening to English music, and even Hong Kong musicians were just playing covers of English bands.” Cantonese singing was rare outside traditional Cantonese opera.

The growth of Cantopop was driven by a huge expansion of Hong Kong media, especially television, which gave it its reach across Asia. At a time when there were virtually no cultural exports from mainland China, Hong

Kong became the default producer of pop culture for the entire region. The eighties were Cantopop’s golden age, Wong said: “There was this exuberant hybridization of East and West, old and new, and a feeling of endless possibilities.” Wong himself was an influential member of the scene, as one half of the duo Tat Ming Pair. Ho had earlier mentioned their 1988 hit “Forbidden Color”—the word for “color”

also means “lust”—as an example of how apparently innocuous mainstream releases could address important issues. The song, with its wish that someday “our forbidden color can permeate beyond our dreaming souls,” is now an L.G.B.T.Q. anthem, and she performed it with him after they had both come out. But, when it was originally released, it would have seemed like just another catchy song to most listeners. “The meaning of a song can change—can hide, reveal, or mutate depending on context,” she said.

The success of Cantopop in the eighties led to a kind of efflorescence in the nineties. The stars, the spectacles, and, for a while, the money got bigger than ever, but the hit factories had become so efficient at reproducing their winning formula, and so focused on releasing songs that could appeal to people across the whole of Asia, that the product became homogenized. “Hard-nosed capitalism helped create the Heavenly Kings and Queens,” Wong said, using a term reserved for the very biggest stars. It was in this world that Ho struggled in her early years. “You had to write and deliver a certain type of song, a safe song,” she said. “There is stagnation in an environment where experimentation isn’t encouraged because it messes with the bottom line.”

Ho’s emergence as a star coincided with the end of the fat years. In 1998, the industry’s record sales reached 1.6 billion Hong Kong dollars. By 2017, sales had shrunk to two hundred million, with a market share of just fifteen per cent of total music sales. The decline has been hastened by the reemergence of mainland China as an economic and cultural power. Cantopop has been losing out to its Mandarin counterpart, Mandopop. “The mainland’s entertainment industry no longer needs Hong Kong,” Wong said. “They have developed their own Heavenly Kings and Queens, their own Anita Mui.”

The rise and fall of Cantopop mirrors the growing and waning influence of the place that produced it. Hong Kong, formed by the unlikely confrontation between an ascendant British Empire and a diminished Chinese one, enjoyed an anomalous period of



dominance, and it sang of its own troubled adolescence. Though its overwrought laments about painful sunburns and doomed relationships may have seemed more theatrical than real, they provided a public platform for private longings, expressing the cultural rupture underlying the heritage of an island and its ceaseless tide of immigrants.

My last evening in Hong Kong coincided with the twenty-ninth anniversary of the Tiananmen Square massacre, or the “June 4th incident,” as it is known in the People’s Republic. Every year since 1989, the day has been commemorated by a vigil in Hong Kong’s Victoria Park, a startling sanctuary of green in the midst of the steel-and-concrete jungle. It is the only public memorialization of the Tiananmen events permitted on Chinese soil.

I went to Causeway Bay, the city’s busiest shopping district, to follow a procession to the park, about half a mile away. Cordoned off from traffic, the street resembled a lively night market. On either side of the road were booths where politicians and activists wielding bullhorns passed out flyers. Vertical blue and red banners—proclaiming people power and freedom of the press—billowed in the wind. I caught sight of Joshua Wong and Nathan Law standing on a platform, shaking hands with supporters. Groups of policemen in blue berets stood, arms folded, expressionlessly surveying the growing crowd.

There had been a light rain, and, when we finally emerged onto the park’s central lawn, there was a sweet, loamy smell. Thousands of people had already amassed, holding candles in tiny paper cones. The vigil, which is organized by a group of veteran campaigners, has always had the democratization of China as its central message, but since the Umbrella Revolution, it has seemed to be as much about what’s happening in present-day Hong Kong as about what happened in Beijing before activists like Wong and Law were born.

The voice of an organizer boomed through a bank of speakers in Cantonese and Mandarin, remarking on how strange it was that more years had



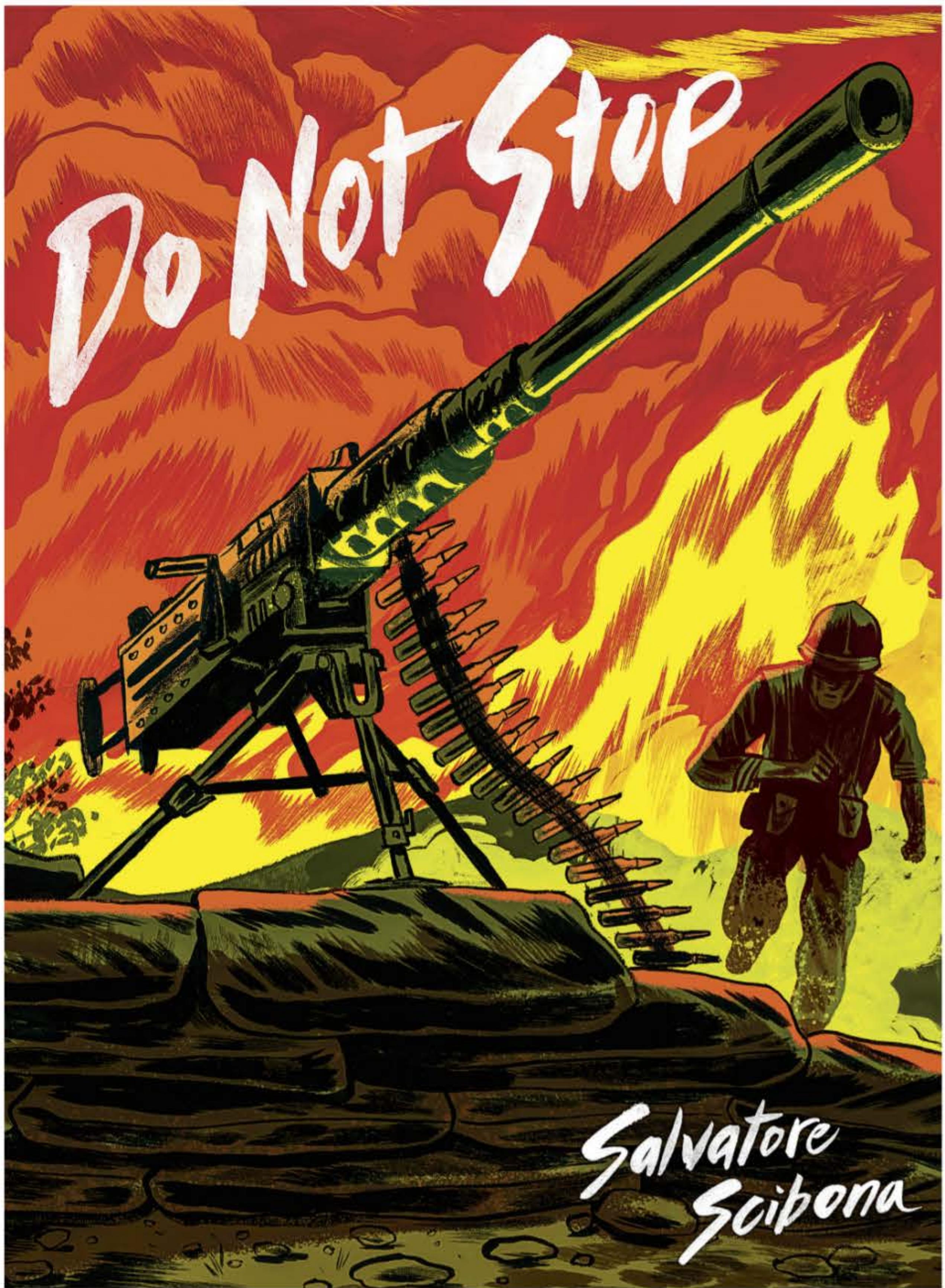
passed since the Tiananmen massacre than were lived by the young men and women who died. In front of me, a mother wiped her eyes as she held onto her toddler daughter. On a screen, the face of an elderly woman appeared, the mother of a nineteen-year-old man who had been killed during the massacre. She looked away from the camera as she recalled going to identify the body. “My son was like me—he had a mole on his forehead,” she said. “When I saw the mole on his forehead and the clothes he wore when he left for work, I fell limp to the ground.”

The vigil lasted around two hours. As it was drawing to an end, a song came over the speakers:

Perhaps my eyes will never open again.  
Will you understand my silent  
emotions? . . .  
If it’s to be so, grieve not,  
The soil of our Republic contains the  
love we have given!

It was “Bloodstained Glory,” but not the version I’d loved as a child. Rather, it was a recording that Anita Mui had made soon after Tiananmen, to commemorate the deaths of the protesters, students who loved their country and gave themselves to the cause of making it something better than it was.

The melody looped in my brain as we walked out of the park, and I remembered what Denise Ho had said about how context can reveal new meanings to a song. “Bloodstained Glory” was a hymn of government propaganda that turned into an anthem of resistance, a tribute to dead People’s Liberation Army soldiers that now memorialized people killed by People’s Liberation Army soldiers. It seemed somehow appropriate that a Cantopop singer had brought about this transformation, and it occurred to me that, at its root, it was a love song. ♦



**O**kinawa was a fever dream of mosquitoes and Falstaff beer. A Marine Corps rule said they couldn't put Vollie on the plane to deploy if he was too drunk to walk unassisted across the tarmac and up the stairs into the bird. Why did command make a rule like that if they were going to give you liberty to see the town the night before you flew out?

A buddy he'd met Stateside in survival training, a ranch hand from New Mexico, was teaching Vollie to drink himself sick. "The belly got to get swole up," his companion said. "Loose that belt. Let the bubbles in down deep. You're a beer camel now. They'll put me on that plane in ten pieces is the only way. Tie me together in the cargo hold. We used to keep camels on the ranch. Two of them. Brother, could they drink up the whole irrigation ditch. See now, the way you doing, either breathing or drinking, that there is a mistake. You got to keep up breathing while the beer goes down." He had a head full of cuspatte teeth, and when he snored in the bunk his eyes opened, showing only the grisly whites while the irises pointed elsewhere inside the skull. His name was Bobby Heflin.

They headed to a different bar. Everywhere in the street people were trying to sell them laundry detergent, beer and cigarettes by the case, shaving products, all the brands of home in bright familiar packaging with the power to transport Vollie back to what already seemed a previous life: long afternoons under the lift in the dank garage, where a transistor sang catchy odes to gum and window cleaners and he timed the turns of a ratchet to the rhythm of the jingle beat.

They got to the new bar. Vollie took a seat at a long plank table where some squids were playing bridge, concentrated and insular and leaning back to hide their cards amid the narrow quarters of the table like a crowded raft. Heflin went away for more beers.

Then back on the Okinawan street and everybody trying to sell Vollie more detergent. Tide, the washday miracle, cleanest washes you can get. Winston, the filter blend that makes the big taste difference. Falstaff, beer that satisfies your taste for living. A C-141 came in low enough you could see the light warp-

ing behind its engines and a red cross painted on its tail fin, so its cargo would be what? Casualties, he figured. Get the package with the spear and you'll know enjoyment's here, because it's Wrigley's here, the biggest little treat in all the land. All this while he stumbled in streets lit beautiful as yards at Christmas, every moment more beautiful as the tropical dusk settled in, and the neon red lights everywhere invited him into establishments with silhouettes of what he had learned was a Martini glass. You could also buy a squatting ape carved out of a hollowed coconut, with a slot in its mouth for your spare change. You saved your money like that instead of blowing it on beer and trinkets to send to your folks, who had no need of conch shells that carried home the sound of the soughing sea. His folks were on a farm in Calamus, Iowa, too old to work the place on their own, but he had left them there, as though forgotten. He had volunteered.

Vollie led Heflin toward a cocktail lounge. Or maybe it was the other way around: Heflin led Vollie. Or the other, other way: both of them led by the red neon figure of a Martini glass suspended above the establishment's door. The place inside swarmed with marines—you'd think an invasion was on—skinny pimpled white black, laughing idiots eager to get mowed down to the ankles, reaped like corn. Heflin had gone away again, because here he was coming back with two fresh cans. "Give me your life," he shouted. Except it was *knife* he'd said, and he turned the beers upside down and stabbed them on the bottom and showed how to cover the hole then flip it right side up, crack the top, slip the tab into the can, and shoot the beer. All this Vollie did, but the beer tasted wrong. His can had halfway drained, the logo lion's head leering, before it became clear the discombobulating foreignness of the beer consisted in its being hot beer, hot as blood. Then the can was empty, Falstaff the choicest product of the brewer's art, and Heflin howling like a spanked dog, and Vollie felt a baseball bat smack him in the eyes: hold on, it was only the hot beer like a blow to the head. A girl—a perfect Japanese girl with shiny clothes—came by with a tray of Singapore slings and said, "Your job is to

die," except inflected like a question. "The hell it is," he said. She repeated, "You want to buy?" Yes. And how. Another for his buddy? Yes, for the cowboy, too. Look at his shark teeth. Don't kiss him, your mouth'll get stuck in there. And the girl went away. If you were under the influence they weren't supposed to put you on the plane. It bewildered him the motleyness of what you could buy from a single market stall—only he was pretty sure he was still inside the cocktail place and only thinking about the market stalls flanking the street outside—all the products of home though he was in Japan, and also face paint, magazines, hi-fis, porno, decals extolling the honor of the Third Marine Division, the Fighting Third; all for sale from the same codgers in the street, no distinctions whatever to clarify what you were supposed to buy from the one stall rather than the other, which was too confusing, and that was why he wanted to go back under the neon silhouette of the cocktail glass into the lounge, because the silhouette of the cocktail glass clarified things, made it plain what you were supposed to do in there. Except if he was looking at the sign he was outside, and how was he outside? He actually was outside after all. Because his drink was inside, so he went back in there. He sat on a high chair, and another shiny girl, a penumbra of light around her like a saint in a picture, wearing a brilliant, lithe, vertically striped dress like pulled taffy with a fluorescent light rod stuck in it she glowed so, approached him carrying a tray of plastic tumblers, red and frothy with straws and a quarter round of pineapple clipping the lip of the drinks and asked, Would he like a long beverage?

Later, he would remember the chair. A spindle-back chair that turned on ball bearings. He would remember he was sitting in this chair taking the plastic drink from the shiny girl, then not being greedy with the pineapple slice, taking only the one bite to avoid the sneaky pricks of pine that hid in the flesh. And he would remember he had yet to pay the girl and turned in the chair with a dollar in his fist lest she vanish before she could be paid, a sudden swinging turn that swept the chair from under him, and the very next thing—no time

elapsed at all, a perfect glue or weave between the days—the very next thing, there's a voice, a staticky voice over an intercom saying, "Gentlemen, fasten your seat belts. You are landing in the Republic of Vietnam."

You'd see a guy was scared. They were all of them scared out of their minds even while stoned, but you'd see, what was it, the eyes too open, too reactive to movement or the glint of the sun on passing scooter windshields; eyes too certain they could see it coming, the moment, the fell turn; a crouchy way of moving around even when the guy had no gear to hump; and it all amounted to a greed to go on living, laced with the knowledge it was not to be. Like, I know I ain't getting out of here. And then, a few weeks later, you'd hear that guy was dead.

There wasn't any sense to make of this phenomenon. Unless God didn't like you expecting too much and he punished you for it by giving you what you expected to get. And you might think, All right, then I'll go ahead and expect to make it home. But that was just vanity. No available facts supported such a foolish assurance. Within a week of Vollie's arrival in the country, he was picking shards of the head of a lance corporal off his shirt, a boy nearly his same age, and hair attached to the shards that smelled of smoke and Brylcreem.

You'd see a guy stop short three times while tying the same shoe, stop to look up at moonlight flicking off a rock while the river moved on it, stop and look, stop and look. And a month later that guy would be dead. The lesson was, anything you love so bad that everywhere you look you see how you're going to lose it, that thing will be taken from you. Even your life.

So Vollie had a mantra—he had learned to meditate from Bobby Heflin, of all unquiet people, who'd read some magazine articles about Buddhism and a Buddhist's all-eclipsing indifference to property, to life, to limb. Vollie had a mantra, and he sat still in the dark on his bunk with his back against the plywood hooch wall at Dong Ha, with his eyes half closed and his folded feet

aflame from fungal itching, and he breathed deep and said within the mind, It don't mean nothing. Into his consciousness came a vision of how he would lose his hand, the right hand, which played the melody on the Baldwin upright back home, and he said without speaking, It don't mean nothing. Not that the fear didn't mean anything, or the vision or the pain, but the

hand didn't mean anything. Then the vision of reaching into a hole in the ground, a hidden tunnel entrance, with the left hand, the harmony hand, reaching into the ground in the jungle knowing the V.C. had a whole world of interconnected tunnels, whole supply channels underground. A whole divi-

sion might be waiting down there to bite off the hand so why was he doing this? But he was doing it in the vision and saw with lightning clarity the hole explode and the fire leaping out of it, and his own blood spitting on his face, and these two stumps at the ends of his arms like when a kid walks on the road in winter without gloves and bunches up the fists within the cuffs, except the hands were not hidden, melody and harmony, they were gone. And of the hands he said crisply in the mind, They don't mean nothing. And he saw his silver-headed father sneezing in the hog barn, ailing in his bed, and said, It don't mean nothing. Meaning he didn't mean anything, the aging man at home, the red peeling face awaiting Vollie's return. And he saw the farm with only his mother working it—it didn't mean nothing. Cracked drain tile clogged with earth that made the meadow flood—it didn't mean nothing. The apple trees unsprayed and the fruit eaten to pulp by curculios—it didn't mean nothing. And he got up and went into a tent where a couple of dirt-caked convoy drivers lay on cots asleep in front of a TV showing a police movie, all sirens and shadows and waxy hair, the unsteady horizontal hold on the black-and-white screen catching the moment, the scene, and losing it and the scene running away like a loose blind, then catching it again, shadows and then glowing white human faces close to the

camera, and Lauren Bacall looked out of the convex box into the night that reeked of monsoon funk, with lust and reproach in her face, as if to say, I dare you to forget me, too.

The country had been on fire from the moment he first landed. He'd only ever seen a big civilian city from the inside of planes or airports, and now he was outside on the tarmac—in his undress blues and carrying a sea bag, and the uncountable Falstaffs and Singapore slings were exacting their revenge on his head and guts—in a city, Da Nang, that was home to hundreds of thousands and was taking artillery fire, smoke rising like giant ghost trees from the rooftops.

Within a couple of hours he was assigned to the 26th Marines at a supply depot in the rear at Dong Ha, from which he was to run convoys up the dirt roads to the forward combat bases near the D.M.Z. at Camp Carroll, Lang Vei, Quang Tri, something called the Rockpile, and another spot that was just an airstrip, really, as it turned out—a road, a cliff, and an airstrip on a low plateau outside a village called Khe Sanh, although whatever human life in the village had been raptured lately, right before he passed through it the first time, so lately the cats were still delicately eating scraps in the hot trash heaps, the cats the souls of the sinners left behind.

Convoy orders were nice and simple: Keep going. A long line of trucks in single file, twenty, fifty, sometimes a hundred trucks. You get a flat tire, you keep going. He drove an M54, a five-ton truck with ten wheels, and you could lose a tire, as long as it wasn't in front, and keep on up the slick road to the combat base. A truck disabled by whatever mechanical failure or land mine, you ditch that truck and keep going. If it obstructs the road you push it off the cliff, don't matter if your mother's inside. Do not stop. They were running candy canes and powder charges and everything in between—building supplies, shovels, canned milk—but the cargo and any disabled truck could be replaced. Two minutes stopped on a mountain road was plenty long enough for a convoy to get sighted and blown to hell from incoming.



Squads of grunts were guarding the road, on patrol or dug in, or some of them hiding in rock formations, because up near the D.M.Z. the place could have been Mars for all the cover any vegetation provided. But you hardly saw these dug-in or hiding squads and fire teams until you were right on top of them. And while the convoy headed back to Dong Ha the afternoon after a drop, the grunts guarding the road would throw a bag into your truck as you drove by, a burlap or polypropylene woven bag usually used for sandbagging but with a rock in it to make it sail like a projectile, and you'd snatch it coming in your window. Inside was a passel of rumpled lists of the supplies they needed: razor blades, rations, bullets, cigarettes, soap. Somebody wrote, *Chicken soup or orange juice—we all got colds.* It was Christmas every day, and Vollie was Santa Claus taking requests. Every list pleaded for beer, but he couldn't find any for the longest time.

Sometimes the roadside grunts put mail in the sandbags along with the rock and the rumpled lists, and if they were dug in far enough from the road you had to square up, high on the mount atop the cab, where Vollie often manned a .50-calibre machine gun, to snag the thing from the air like a long fly to the outfield, and inside was a letter to Mr. and Mrs. Stanley Routenberg of Livonia, Michigan, and a rumpled note to the convoy demanding, if not beer, at least a couple of hundred pounds of grass. All Vollie had for them to drink was Coca-Cola. It turned out some guys made a casserole out of rations cooked in Coke. A Puerto Rican from the 2/9 Marines told him that was how you were *supposed* to cook pork, which was comical, trying to tell a Clinton County boy he didn't know how to cook a pig.

There were whole villages made of Coke cases, and the ingenious Vietnamese had pleated together roofs for their huts out of the dissected Coke cans. The convoy had to slow up through one such village, and they should have known better because as they rolled into the village no kids were flinging themselves at the sides of the trucks, begging for candy and rations. Everybody was in a hut someplace.

Then a bomb detonated in the road. A Marine artillery shell, most likely, that

had failed to explode and been rejigged into a land mine. The mine blew off the front end of the truck right ahead of Vollie's. Three men flew up and away from the explosion, but they still had their legs, and scrambled, flesh hanging in strips through smoldering fatigues—the automatic marine body that scrambles before it understands—into the back of Vollie's truck. The convoy plowed teetering right over the cardboard village, right over the Coke huts, crushing who knew what, rice bags or people, under the listing axles, and the convoy did not stop. It got to Camp Carroll ahead of schedule carrying mail, tents, diesel fuel, kerosene, Winston the one filter cigarette that delivers flavor twenty times a pack, two wounded, one dead. He was Santa Claus and the mailman and a teen-ager driving tons of munitions through a monsoon-slick road in early February with *rat-a-tat* sniper fire in the distant hills as normal as bird-song. Winston's got that filter flavor.

Then back in Dong Ha he found the Quonset hut where the squids were

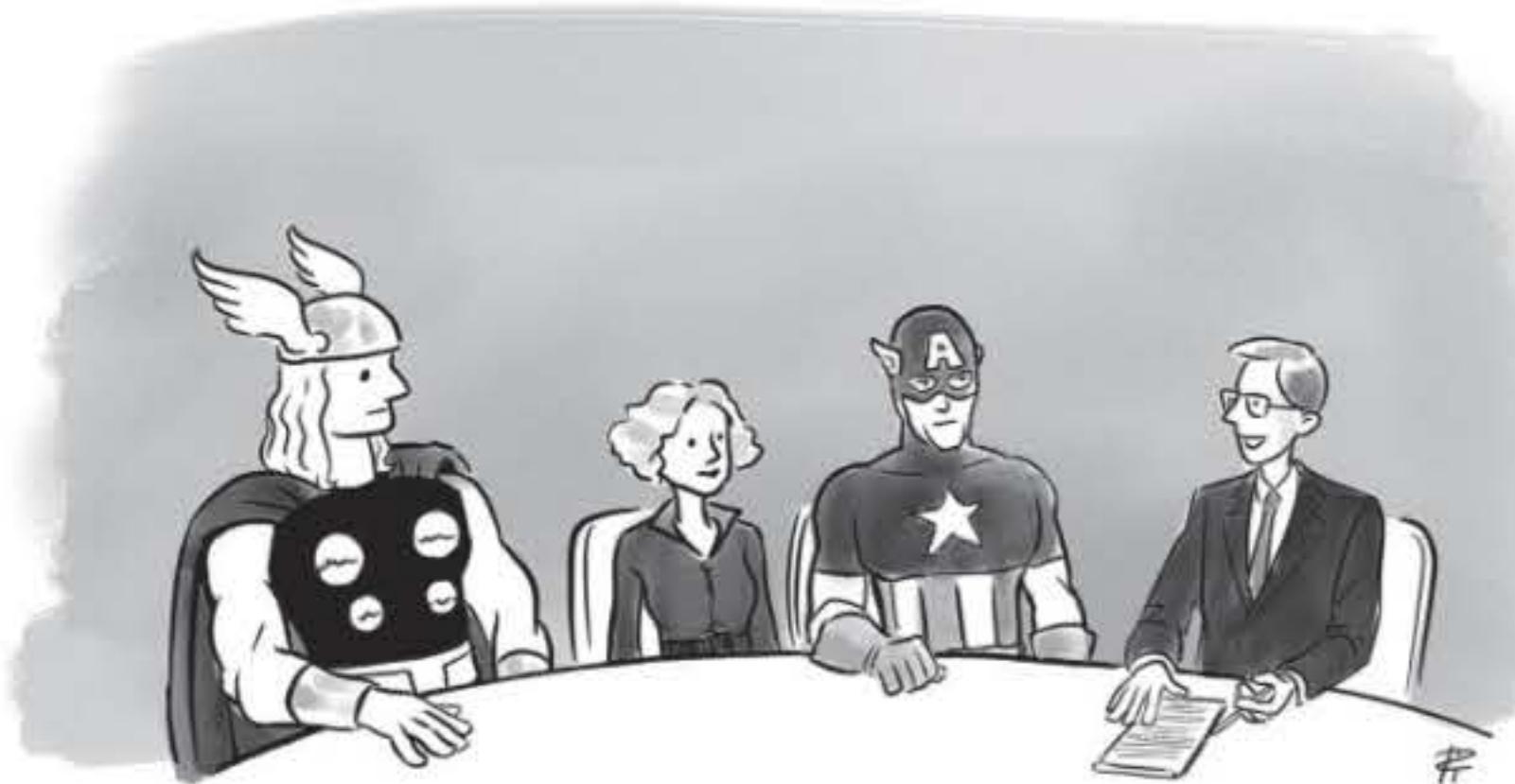
hiding their beer. If marines never stole from the Army and the Navy we could never win a war. A marine is a thief by training, tradition, and necessity caused by, Why are we always out of supplies and they're so flush? Another marine from his convoy group lit a smoke bomb at the far end of the depot, and the squids went running to investigate while Vollie backed up his truck to the Quonset hut, and with a dolly, a ramp, and four men pushing they got a whole pallet of Hamm's beer into his truck and covered it, and he was out of there before the quartermaster or anybody else was any the wiser. Clean cut with smoothness aged in—Hamm's, it's the refreshingest. Then the whole way to the Rockpile, they threw warm cases of beer down to the men popping from behind boulders, from under makeshift blinds, men joyous as retriever dogs to see the labels on the cases.

His convoy had nearly reached the Rockpile, midday, when a marine appeared like a vision hovering above the road in the distance. At first it seemed



*Victoria Roberts*

*"I will always be better at loading the dishwasher, Marie.  
Can we live with that?"*



*"Well, I was bitten by a radioactive lawyer and ended up with the power of attorney."*

• •

the warm beer was giving Vollie fantast hallucinations, but he'd only drunk the one, nice and slow to let the stomach take it, not even the one, a swig remained in the can he held with fingers that meantime guided the steering wheel. The marine wore a painted wooden sign around his neck. You could see his busted helmet and flak jacket, but the feet were too loose to be standing. He floated midair. A miracle. A marine with invisible wings. Then as the truck got close you could see the spike that had been introduced through his ass and into his torso, a thin spike you spied only when you were near enough to see his face—in fact a dead Vietnamese face about fifteen years old with flies nesting in the nose, dressed in old shreds of Marine fatigues. The sign around his neck read:

CAUTION:

This road patrolled by the Magnificent Bastards  
2nd Battalion, 4th Marines

And a little drawing of a sea horse for a signature.

They slept that night at the Rock-pile, or anyhow under it. There wasn't any need to drive up the crazy mountain, or any road to climb it, didn't seem. And in the morning they drove back to Dong Ha without stopping, occasionally throwing C rations of ham and motherfuckers at the Vietnamese in their loose-fit rags who lined the roads sometimes begging for food and sometimes pretending to beg for food so

you would slow down if you were stupid and they would throw a grenade in your cab.

They pulled into Dong Ha, and the grinning screeching children swarmed begging frenziedly, and the trucks pushed through with all due haste. Farther along, near the base gate, an old woman—or not so old but without any teeth, the brown smiling gums gone to leather from chewing betel nut—waved her straw cone hat sweet and friendly by the roadside. Suddenly she bent low and fished at her skirt bottom. Vollie unholstered the 1911 pistol from his shoulder, or his hand unholstered it, jutted it out the window, and aimed it, the peaceful fleet hand that did its work while the laggard mind raced to understand what was happening.

Then the old woman, unfazed by a semi-automatic pistol aimed at her face by a dumb white teen-ager in a truck, pulled her skirt up over her belly and pulled down her shapeless drawers, calling, "Fucky-fucky five dollars."

His hand drew his pistol back inside the cab. The trucks rumbled on through the gate, into the compound, and the men refuelled and parked at the tire shop and went to the mess and then to their bunks.

He had never seen a woman's privates before, he had seen pictures and he had dreamed dreams, but the mind so unswerving in its misguided notions and expectations could not shake all night the weirdness that the fucking

part was in the front of her, whereas in the female of all the other animals he could think of you found the fucking parts behind. The frontwardness, the face-to-face aspect of human fucking was itself backward. But no, that was another lie of the discordant mind. The body didn't know we were made to do things the wrong way—it didn't know this thing that wasn't true. It got a hard-on all the same to see a woman without her clothes, even a decrepit one; though perhaps the hard-on came from the pistol he had aimed at her face and had not fired.

Ham and motherfuckers was ham and lima beans and even the starvelings up at Khe Sanh didn't want them.

Do not stop the convoy.

But then one day while they were taking apart their pallets at Khe Sanh—uncommon to stop at Khe Sanh, rumors of a hell of a ruckus up there, what with the R.P.G.s and the 130-millimetre guns, so the Marine Corps was supplying mostly from the air—he heard a noise. He was unloading into a hooch and he heard a noise. He looked around him. The four other guys unloading with him were already gone. He ran out of the tent aware he was a step behind something important, and the body knowing more as always threw itself in the trench outside the hooch and landed on a dead grunt who, wait, was not dead but crouching, ducked and covered, in a stream that, wait, was not a stream but a trench filled two feet deep with water. The grunt threw Vollie off him. Vollie landed in the water. Six men crouched half submerged. The sun was setting through the drizzle. I have heard incoming real close and so I am in a trench, reported the idiot laggard mind, and I am afraid. Then the artillery was everywhere, the surface of the airstrip around him bubbling like a boiling stew, and they stayed in the trench until the sun had set two more times. Somewhere in there he heard a whistle and saw his truck blow up and he figured he would be here at Khe Sanh awhile longer.

Lucky he had dismounted his .50 calibre from the truck an hour before the barrage, intending to take her apart and clean and oil her that night and remount her the next morning,

when they would have headed home to Dong Ha, sort of making nightly love to her, or to be honest not making love, about which he knew only the basic engineering strategy, more like grooming her, getting her ready like a sow before the fair, brushing, greasing. That the .50 calibre had not been destroyed was to prove useful in the two months he was stuck at Khe Sanh.

Everybody in the convoy who manned a .50 calibre had a name for it, usually stencilled with spray paint in the mounting plate above the cab. Guns named Winter Night, Mafia Inc. I, Mafia Inc. II, Voss, Shirley. His he named Hog Butcher, and his intimacy with her was such that, some weeks later, when the grunts mounted her atop the sandbags on the morning the N.V.A. finally came at them in person, a crush of figures like ants, innumerable, he almost snatched her down from the trench lip, fearful lest some harm should come to her and resentful these thieving bastards should touch her. Despite her name and job, he knew the Hog Butcher to be female.

He wasn't the only truck driver stuck at Khe Sanh. Once the big assault started, they couldn't get anybody through to sweep the road for mines and his whole convoy was stranded. Later, no road remained to sweep. Nothing fitting the term appeared to lead from the place. The base was an island in a lake of clay that bubbled with incoming and aerial bombardment. Mortar attacks killed several of the other drivers in the convoy, and he inherited one of their trucks.

For weeks, the perimeter of the airfield was bombed and rocketed and napalmed to such an extent that he kind of got used to the noise. He lived on a plateau with fire surrounding it. His question-asking apparatus having been extracted in boot camp, it didn't occur to him to ask anybody what was out there to bomb so. He couldn't really see what they were trying to hit. It was another driver who asked one of the infantry sergeants what they were bombing. "The enemy, knucklehead," the sergeant said. "Don't you know when you're under siege?" Vollie could not see any enemy. He saw earth afire.

The enemy was underground.

Then there were transport planes, C-130s mostly, the Hercules, supplying them now because evidently no more convoys, but it pleased him the pilots followed the old convoy rule. Do not stop. A Hercules sitting still on a landing strip made a plum target, juicier probably than a stopped convoy since the flames would rise higher in the sky if it was hit. If you are too far away to count the number of your enemy dead, how else to measure success but by the height of the flames? So the pilots did this number where the plane flew low over the strip, sometimes low enough to knock off a man's head if he were standing there. Its hatch dropped open in back, and a grappling hook in the airstrip snagged a loop of cord dangling from the hatch, and the plane kept going, the plane did not stop, but the cord inside was attached to a long succession of supplies on pallets that shot out of the cargo bay and somersaulted as the Hercules cleared the strip, never having touched down.

The base was getting shelled incessantly, the airstrip was a mess, and men ran out there to fill the holes with dirt and cover them with steel land matting while new shells made new holes farther up the strip. Meantime, everywhere around him except a few hills was under equally endless but much higher-flaming aerial bombardment from his own government. Yet he saw no N.V.A., he did not see massed troops. It was a siege in theory only. And there he was outside playing basketball with the grunts sometimes—the N.V.A. couldn't mortar every inch of the compound at every minute so why not get some exercise?—and when he couldn't sleep playing George Gershwin or Schumann songs on a mute piano he had made from a sawbuck tabletop and a Magic Marker, and it got so he could hear the music in his mind, even his mistakes, and steadily improved with this perverse way of playing piano, music minus sound leaving only the boy's body at peace in articulate motion, alive and in time to the moving numbers that measure and govern everything from Schumann to jet propulsion and the pressure of the blood in your arteries. And he boiled rations over stoves made of old tuna cans filled with dirt and gasoline. And



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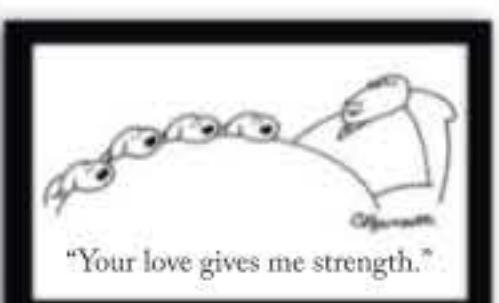


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he was probably going to die, they would be overrun, and it didn't mean nothing.

**T**hen it was dark, late February. The Puerto Rican, Espinoza, had got hold of a pint of bourbon and shared it with Vollie, who had never drunk bourbon or any sort of whiskey. It tasted like Coke boiled to a gravy and cut with lighter fluid. He feared to smoke as he drank lest he catch fire. Espinoza sometimes appeared to be scratching his privates through his pocket while working a sunflower seed in his lips; in fact, he kept a rosary in the pocket and was mumbling prayers. He carried on this way even while they drank bourbon and played cards late at night in Vollie's tent. It was about two in the morning when they had emptied the bottle and Espinoza got up to head back to his tent by the ammunition depot, but a minute later he came back saying he couldn't see his hand in front of his face out there in the dark and fog. So Vollie cleared sleeping room for him in the tent he'd made, his makeshift Khe Sanh home on the dirt off the airstrip which was really, the tent was, nothing more than a half tent made from a parachute pegged to the dirt on one side and tied up to the door of his new truck on the other. And Vollie fell into dreamless inebriate sleep.

Then he woke up yelling, "It hit me. It hit me."

Espinoza could be heard wrestling with the tent walls, tearing the top edge of the thing away from the truck, unable in the total dark of foggy moonless night to see the flap of the enclosure, the side Vollie kept open to let the breeze in and through which shrapnel had just evidently flown and drilled his face, his arms, his throat.

"It hit me," Vollie said. The splatter somehow soft it was so warm. He couldn't move or see. Unaccountably he had been hit only in the parts of him his fatigues didn't cover. If he couldn't get out of here it was probably because his legs didn't work. "It hit me," he said to nothing and no one and looked down to where his feet ought to be but saw nothing. However, it was dark.

Mind and body at last rendezvoused, and he sent his foot a message, speaking it aloud to put all his parts on notice to attend. "I'll stomp my foot, and

if I hear it then it's still there." The muscles of the upper leg then contracted, and a low quiet peaceful stamp sounded amid the nylon of the tent enveloping him like a shroud. He convened likewise with the other foot.

Outside, Espinoza said, "Who the fuck you talking to? Get under the fucking truck, man."

He wasn't hit, Vollie wasn't, not exactly. Mud had splattered his face, neck, arms. A shell or a rocket had exploded nearby and blasted the mud through the opening of the tent. He discovered this under the truck, itself not the soundest of places to hide from a barrage. A couple of artillery flashes gave them a visual notion how to make it to the trench. They bolted for the perimeter. This entire interval—waking up believing he was hit, the experiment with his feet, the communing of mind with lower extremities, sliding under the truck, and hustling out to the perimeter and down into the trench with grunts already in there firing—had taken about as long as it takes to butter a piece of toast.

The grunts in the trench had mounted the Hog Butcher on sandbags and they were firing her. They had already used all but one box of the ammunition at hand. But Vollie had stolen and hidden about twenty boxes from a Hercules drop he had helped unload, stolen because that is what a marine does, and secreted them in a hooch about fifty yards away under a case of toilet paper,

He convulsed and screamed as though hit again, but wasn't hit this time, either, not for real. He'd rammed his nuts into a tree. A parting of the smoke and something like dawn light coming over the mountain. And he made it to the hooch and overturned the toilet paper, they called them sweet rolls, gathered three ammunition boxes, and hobbled in his nut-crumped state expecting to be hit and then to explode with all the rounds in his arms; and he was going as fast as he could, his eyes on the destination, the trench, to get behind the sandbags; but higher up, going on solid ground and running back toward the perimeter with the dawnish light, he had another vantage than before; and the light better; one of the boxes threatening to fall; and he tried to keep his eyes on the trench, to get back there; but he had this other vantage now, and his eyes looking upward squinted against the smoke—and that was when he saw them.

He had seen V.C. before, guerrillas, and he had seen shells coming and the 122-millimetre rockets. But now he saw the enemy themselves, the true enemy out of their burrows, the N.V.A. massed and swarming on human legs.

They were like ants, the way ants swarmed over a dead animal in the meadow, except they were all running this way. A few had made it near enough already you could see their shirts criss-crossed with bandoliers. And the laggard mind said, Hold on, those people over there want to kill me. All this in the two seconds before he got his head and his boxes down below the line of sandbags. He crouched. His privates screamed in pain. The grunt who had commandeered the Hog Butcher switched with him and got low to feed the machine her bullets from the new boxes while Vollie manned the machine, the Hog Butcher, who was in actual fact an anti-aircraft weapon that to fire directly on human beings violated some article of the Geneva Conventions, so said the scuttlebutt. Five rounds, pause, five rounds, pause; microscopic bits of the lands in her barrel flying out of her muzzle; and the red tracers streaming like lengths of glowing rope afire, fast at first then slow and peaceful in the deeper distance, then careening off at sharp angles when they hit a rock or for all he knew some kid's brain bucket, his helmet, a kid whose tracers were coming



and he jumped out of the trench and darted top speed at the hooch, which under the circumstances seemed as far away as bumfuck Egypt.

He ran fast. Every step a stroke of wild luck. He turned a corner. In another artillery flash the hooch appeared low and dark through smoke. He had never run faster. But somebody had cut down a dead tree for firewood, leaving the stump three feet off the ground, and he struck it at a sprint right in his privates.

right back at Vollie reciprocally, but the N.V.A. tracers were green across the low almost-night sky, a field of arcing and suddenly careening red and green tracers, four invisible rounds between every tracer, the colors like Christmas lights, and the Hog Butcher jammed.

She jammed. He opened her from the top. It was like a vivisection. He had to use his asbestos gloves. She was so hot she could take off his skin if he touched her. And he dumped a bottle of thirty-weight motor oil all over her innards and her exposed chamber and closed her up, and the grunt re-fed the chain of long cartridges and remounted her, and Vollie went back to firing.

Like ants or a tide. And the tracers came rocketing out of the barrel hot and red like wishes that seemed to slow as they sailed farther away, tracers that sometimes took a sharp upward or outward turn like wishes gone wrong when the tracer hit a rock or a helmet or another bullet, amid the profusion of rounds five times as numerous as were visible, and ricocheted. And he saw some of the people convulse, falling backward through the tracer fire. They were coming fast, and Vollie was near enough the command post to hear a radioman cranking the phone and calling out coordinates.

Do not stop the convoy.

Other scuttlebutt said command had started the rumor about the Geneva Conventions to save money on the big expensive .50-calibre cartridges.

He aimed his weapon at the tide, the tracers like wishes or seed corn you scattered away from yourself and that disappeared into someplace you couldn't see. It was a wish because you sent it out of you but you couldn't know what would come of it. The machine sent a shock wave of recoil through all his bones, one-two-three-four-five pause one-two-three-four-five pause. He ducked down to help unload another box of ammunition and asked the grunt, "Who's he calling?", meaning the radioman.

"New Jersey, I guess."

That was a joke, the radioman calling the prestigious state back East where Vollie's mother had once gone for a cousin's wedding and come back with a picture book about skyscrapers for her boy.

However, it was neither a joke nor a state. The grunt said, "Naw, man. The ship."



*"Treat me like I treat 'creatives'!"*

The battleship. A recommissioned dreadnought, the New Jersey, with sixteen-inch guns revamped and rumored to be out of dry dock in Philadelphia and headed this way. Vollie fired and fired continuously and yet resignedly; what with the numbers, the ants, they were about to be overrun. Do not stop the convoy. And he kept firing.

Then it was as if somebody as far away as Davenport had fired a cannon at the barn in Calamus and hit it square in the roof. And hit it again. And hit it again. Right where the ants were swarming there was a shock wave and a wall of fire and clouds that rose in columns and bloomed flowers of ash, dirt, smoke. Espinoza ran to the hooch and came back with more ammunition for the Hog Butcher. Vollie kept firing. Turning to his left and right like a radio dial. Those must have been the shells coming from the New Jersey. You heard them shearing the air overhead, then a shock wave and a cloud, impossible magic, as if an object could have knowledge—the shells coming from afar in the sea and landing right where the radioman had directed them.

It took less than ten minutes for the

Phantoms to fly the hundred miles from Da Nang. All down the long N.V.A. lines the enemy were swarming and firing, and the shells blew them up, and Phantoms flew low dropping napalm on the people. And more sixteen-inch shells came from the New Jersey, or wherever, hissing by and detonating almost at once.

His orders were not to stop the convoy. He looked behind him. His second truck wasn't there. Motherfuckers had driven off with his truck. No, they hadn't, the truck was that pile of twisted smoking steel, rubber, and canvas. He had lost a second truck. Each truck cost about what the farm cost, and he had lost two of them.

Nobody had told him what any of this—the airstrip, the siege, the bombardment—was for.

When he got back to Dong Ha after it was over, an Easter card waited for him with his mother's signature in it alongside his father's mark, and a two-dollar bill, an old bill dated 1953 but crisp. She had ironed it. ♦

# THE CRITICS



BOOKS

## THE BAD PLACE

*How the idea of Hell has shaped the way we think.*

BY VINSON CUNNINGHAM

When I was a kid of ten or eleven years old, newly returned to New York after a few years living in Chicago, I started accompanying my mother to a church in Harlem, in a shallow, sunlit upper room just south of 125th Street. Every Sunday, service began with a procession. The Hammond organ would start up, and the ministers, carrying their Bibles, trailed by the pastor, would file in in a loose line, singing a song. It went:

This is the Lord's church, and Jesus is Lord!  
This is the church that's been established  
on his Word.  
This is the church that love is building; the  
gates of Hell shall not prevail!  
This is the Lord's church, and Jesus is Lord!

It was meant to be a happy song—you could tell by its confident insistence on Christ's kingship, by the shuffling major key in which it was played, and by the smiles and falsetto ad-libs it elicited from the crowd. But, either there in the sanctuary or later, lying in bed, I sometimes fixated on the bit about the gates of Hell. My father had died recently, and I'd begun wondering where he might be. I'd been assured that he was in Heaven, but I could tell, even then, that he hadn't been a saint. Sometimes I pictured him enveloped in light, dissolving into the never-ending worship around the throne of God. Other times, helped along by the accounts of my Jesuit schoolteachers, I imagined him waiting, otiose and slightly bored—restless, as he had often seemed to be in life—in the long, cosmic queue of Purgatory. Also possible, I had to concede, was the Bad Place, which, until then, I'd thought of mostly as the un-air-conditioned underside to Heaven.

Here, though, was a different idea. Hell, according to the logic of the song, wasn't only a place beneath my feet for the lesser of the dead but a force ruling a large portion of the world around me, gathering troops and waging battle against the good. More immediately distressing than the prospect of going there was the idea that it could be headed in my direction, determined to overtake me even before my death. "Satan has desired to have you," my new pastor sometimes preached, quoting Jesus' words to the apostle Peter, "that he may sift you as wheat." Had Hell already occupied me, before I'd even known about the war?

The further from childhood I get, the fewer people I meet who worry about—or even believe in—what Scott G. Bruce, the editor of a new and quite terrifying compilation, "The Penguin Book of Hell," calls the "punitive afterlife." But the Hell here on earth—the one that the preachers promised would lose in the end—hasn't gone anywhere. You might even notice a slight uptick, these days, in its invocation. As a metaphor for global warming, hellfire is almost too on the nose. There are also the grim jokes about how, during our most recent and most wretched Presidential election, we all surely died and boarded the first elevator downstairs, where we are now in permanent residence. (Search Twitter for the phrase "We are literally in Hell" and let the scenarios wash over you.) It's not only the liberals and the environmentally concerned who are prone to invoking Hell to convey the current state of things. When Donald Trump, during his downbeat Inaugural Address, conjured an "American carnage" that left

"rusted-out factories scattered like tombstones across the landscape of our nation," and "crime and gangs and drugs that have stolen too many lives and robbed our country of so much unrealized potential," what was he describing but a national apocalypse, a Hades in Chicago and at the border? Our ancestors developed their ideas of Hell by drawing on the pains and the deprivations that they knew on earth. Those imaginings shaped our understanding of life before death, too. They still do.

The afterlife is an old room in the house of the human imagination, and the ancients loved to offer the tour. Homer has Odysseus sail through the underworld in search of a way back home, to Ithaca. (As Bruce reminds us in one of his helpful introductory notes, the underworld, according to the cosmological geography of the *Odyssey*, is "not deep beneath the earth, but on a dark and distant shore.") "The dead and gone came swarming up around me, each asking about the grief that touched him most," Odysseus says. Some of the dead, such as Orion, "that huge hunter," who keeps up his chase on the shadow world's fields, undergo fates that seem like dim epilogues of their lives. Others suffer extravagantly. Sisyphus can't get his boulder to keep to the high ground. Vultures peck at the rapist Tityus' guts. Tantalus stands in a pool of water that flees when he stoops for a drink, and he takes shade under trees whose fruits shy away when he tries to grab a bite. An uncanny mirroring happens when Odysseus encounters Hercules, yesteryear's great hero, who, in keeping with his



*Hell is an old room in the house of the human imagination, and the ancients loved to offer the tour.*

half-divine nature, has been split in two after death: the ghost of his mortal side is stuck in the underworld, while "the man himself" lives in bliss on Mt. Olympus. Like an over-the-hill older brother recounting his athletic exploits, Hercules remembers his first turn through the pit. Comparing Odysseus' deathly journey to his own famous labors, he asks, wearily, "You too?"

The Hades drawn by Homer, and, later, by Virgil, in the *Aeneid*, is not quite Hell as understood in the post-medieval Christian tradition, but it is one of its ancestors. While all of the dead go to Hades, there are tortures specially designed and individually designated for those who acted badly while alive. (Of course, as in everything Greek and Roman, there's an unanswered question of agency: just who has done the sorting, and how do we know that this judge has been just?) The "Book of Hell" is determinedly Western and Christian in emphasis: Bruce regards Hades, together with Gehenna—where kings of Judah were said to sacrifice children by fire—and Sheol, the place of darkness awaiting all of us according to the Hebrew Bible, as the forerunners of Christianity's fire and brimstone. He briefly acknowledges the older and vaguer pagan visions found in ancient Egypt and Mesopotamia; Jahannam, Islam's place of punishment, doesn't appear in the book at all.

Within this chosen lineage, the meeting between Odysseus and Hercules coaxes a trope into view. From antiquity forward, our stories about Hell often feature some prematurely damned hero—Orpheus or Aeneas, the three Hebrew boys in the furnace or Jesus during his three days dead, the innocent prisoner or the untried detainee—passing through the state of hopelessness, then coming back, blinking, into the light. There's something practical about this from a storytelling perspective: how better to draw readers or listeners into a godforsaken realm than through the eyes of someone just like them—lost, maybe, but not yet totally toast? (A recent application, and, possibly, a subversion, of this template is the sitcom "The Good Place," which follows four very flawed individuals—archetypical stand-ins for lots of people you probably know—as they tour a false Heaven, and then the entire cos-

mos, in a widening rebellion against an overly stringent afterlife.) There is something philosophical in the pattern, too—the idea that the extremities of earthly experience inevitably draw us toward the higher themes of justice, balance, retribution, mercy, and punishment.

The great poetic example of the blurriness between the everyday and the ever after is Dante's *Inferno*, which begins with the narrator "midway upon the journey of our life," having wandered away from the life of God and into a "forest dark." That wood, full of untamed animals and fears set loose, leads the unwitting pilgrim to Virgil, who acts as his guide through the ensuing ordeal, and whose *Aeneid*, itself a recapitulation of the *Odyssey*, acts as a pagan forerunner to the *Inferno*. This first canto of the poem, regrettably absent from the "Book of Hell," reads as a kind of psychological-metaphysical map, marking the strange route along which one person's private trouble leads both outward and downward, toward the trouble of the rest of the world. In the end, Dante's strayings help him back onto straight street, but not before he looks, literally, into the eyes of the Devil, who is trapped beneath a layer of ice:

The emperor of this kingdom of gloom  
Came up out of the ice at the mid-point of  
his chest...

O, what a marvel it appeared to me,  
When I saw three faces on his head!  
The one in front was a brilliant red;

There were two others that joined with this  
one  
Above the middle part of either shoulder  
And they merged together at the crest of  
his hair...

Underneath each face sprouted two mighty  
wings,  
All six proportioned for a bird of great size;  
I never saw sails of the sea so large.

The masterstroke of this scene in the deepest circle of Hell is in Dante's depiction of each of the Devil's awful mouths: in the foremost (the big red one) is Judas, Jesus' betrayer; in the others are Cassius and Brutus, who worked together to do in Caesar. Pathetic, and almost moving, when you think about it: the worst sinners imaginable, each doomed to everlasting mastication, are guys undone by the successes of their famous friends. Insecurity is a tomb;

these are the kinds of midlife crises from which few people recover. "Abandon all hope, ye who enter here" is as applicable to certain poisonous habits of mind as to the gates of Hell. One leads, inexorably, to the other.

Dante, writing in the early fourteenth century, drew on a bounty of hellish material, from Greek, Roman, and, of course, Christian literature, which is rife with horrible visions of Hell. Bruce includes an excerpt from the *Apocalypse of Paul*, an apocryphal third-century text that narrates a Revelation-style reverie experienced by Paul of Tarsus. An angel bids the evangelist to come and view the dwelling place of the sinners; he sees a "river of fire," in which there are "men and women sunk up to their knees, and other men up to their navels, and . . . others up to their lips, and others up to their hair." Their varying scorch marks indicate levels of depravity: those all the way immersed "were those who conspired with one another, plotting evil against their neighbor." Bruce also excerpts the parable in the Gospel of Luke about a rich man and a poor man. Both die, and the beggar goes to Heaven, "carried by angels to the bosom of Abraham," while the rich man is damned to burn. Suffering, he cries out for help. The cry—which, along with the myth of Tantalus, is echoed in Coleridge's famous line "Water, water, every where, / Nor any drop to drink"—is chilling: "Father Abraham, have mercy on me and send Lazarus to touch the tip of his finger in water to cool my tongue, for I am suffering in this flame."

Reading these various prophecies—in particular, reencountering Dante's peculiar cycle, from his inner life to universal laws and then, through the unbearable torment of others, back to his inner life—returned me to a very different and much more recent chronicle of spiritual experience, not included in the Penguin anthology. The Catholic activist and writer Dorothy Day, in her autobiography, "The Long Loneliness," recounts an episode from her leftist, pre-conversion youth: she participated in a protest, in front of the White House, against the poor treatment of imprisoned suffragettes. The picketing led to the arrest of Day and several fellow-activists, and together the group resolved to go on a hunger strike until they

were released and their demands had been met. After six days, exhausted and increasingly hopeless, Day slipped out of normal consciousness and into a protracted reverie of worldwide despair. Her mind shuttled away from her vacant stomach and visited every other despairing incarcerated soul. "I lost all feeling of my own identity," she writes:

I reflected on the desolation of poverty, of destitution, of sickness and sin. That I would be free after thirty days meant nothing to me. I would never be free again, never free when I knew that behind bars all over the world there were women and men, young girls and boys, suffering constraint, punishment, isolation and hardship for crimes of which all of us were guilty. . . . Why were prostitutes prosecuted in some cases and in others respected and fawned on? People sold themselves for jobs, for the pay check, and if they only received a high enough price, they were honored. Why were some caught, not others? . . . What was good and evil? . . . Never would I recover from this wound, this ugly knowledge I had gained of what men were capable in their treatment of each other.

Day doesn't explicitly associate this meditation with Hell, but her newly deepened association with the poor, and with other people on the periphery of society, has the effect of Dante's journey through the Inferno: it sets her on the path toward the light. The vision is also, perhaps more harrowingly, characteristic of how the idea of Hell has shaped perceptions of our own time. Torturous places such as the Gulag, the gas chamber, death row, and the detainment site are often comprehended, and depicted, as new iterations of perdition. The tendency predates the twentieth century; several American slave narratives could have served as provocative additions to the "Book of Hell." The collection winds toward the present with a section called "Hell of Our Own Making," which includes the journalist Vasily Grossman's firsthand account of the concentration camp at Treblinka and an essay by an incarcerated man named William Blake, who killed a court official while trying to escape a court date for a drug charge. "Yes, it is all true," Grossman writes. "The last hope, the last wild hope that it was all just a terrible dream, has gone." Blake writes about his time in the Special Housing Unit—less euphemistically, solitary confinement. (The essay first appeared in an anthology of such pieces called

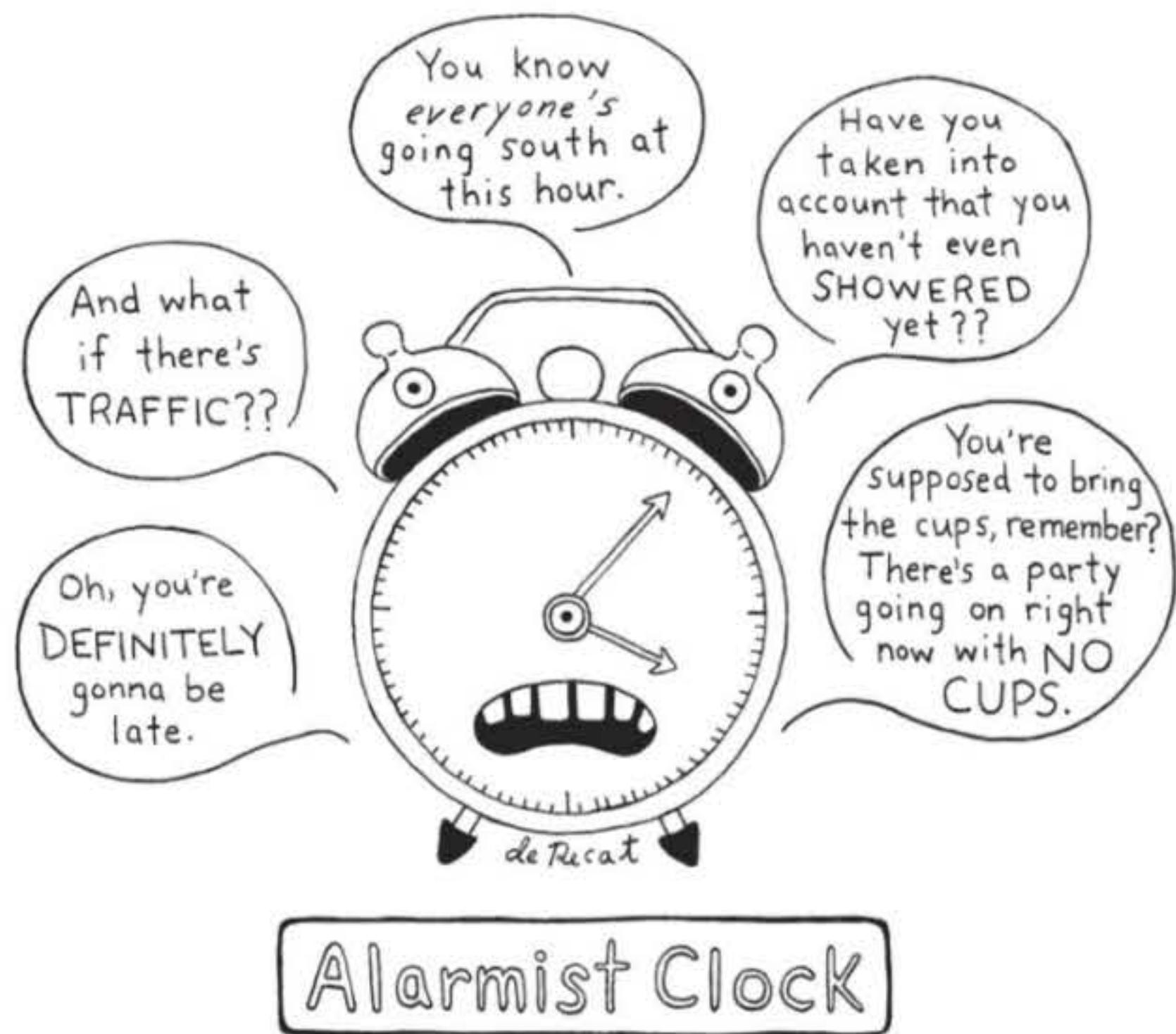
"Hell Is a Very Small Place.") Blake's vision is almost as bleak as Grossman's: "Dying couldn't take but a short time if you or the state were to kill me; in SHU I have died a thousand internal deaths."

**B**elief in an old-fashioned, everlasting Hell hasn't gone away. Just ask the pastor at most local churches, or the subway preacher with his brimstone-heavy pamphlets. But Hell has long been assailed as one of Christianity's cruder means of maintaining control. And some spiritual leaders, intent on presenting a less vengeful God, have attempted to soften or, in some cases, to abolish Hell—mostly to the anger and the anxiety of their co-religionists. Earlier this year, Pope Francis had one of his periodic chats with Eugenio Scalfari, the ninety-four-year-old atheist Italian journalist. Scalfari, who takes no notes during his dialogues with the Holy Father, came away from the session with a blockbuster quote: "A Hell doesn't exist," Francis supposedly said, and wayward souls are "annihilated"—*poof!*—instead of languishing forever. The Vatican denied that the Pope had said any such thing, but it didn't seem entirely out of character. The great theme of Francis's pontificate is his emphasis on mercy over judgment. More

to the point, he has already made it his business to clarify that Hell, properly understood, is less a place than a state—namely, the state of remoteness from the love of God, an inevitable downside of the gift of free will. Here he echoes C. S. Lewis, who considered Hell a choice. "The doors of hell," Lewis wrote, "are locked on the inside."

Scalfari's report was followed by a wave of criticism from Catholics, which felt strange, disproportionately intense. What modern believer wouldn't want to cast off this old, sadistic barrier to faith in a loving God? What kind of deity draws such a hard line between his friends and his enemies, and holds an eternal grudge? Surely the loss of Hell—even the idea of such a loss—should come as a bit of a relief.

St. Thomas Aquinas argued the opposite, half a century before Dante got to work. In the "Summa Theologica," his grand synthesis of Aristotelian philosophy and Christian teaching, he defended the doctrine of Hell and insisted that we should think of it as a benefit, not a bug. Not only does Hell exist, Aquinas reasoned, but those blessed souls who make it to Heaven must be able, by some miracle of cosmic surveillance—the worst and longest season of "Big Brother"—to see and delight in the fate



of Hell's inhabitants. Because God's punishments are unimpeachably correct, the lower regions must serve as part of the heavenly vista—the top-floor view of all that's right and just. "In order that the happiness of the saints may be more delightful to them and that they may render greater thanks to God for it, they are allowed to see perfectly the sufferings of the damned," Aquinas writes.

Awful, I know. But think of our own justice system, and also of the various means by which we now claim access to the missteps of our fellow-citizens—tax liens, criminal records, mug shots, bad status updates screenshotted or automatically archived. Think of the camera in the courtroom. Think, too, of those Americans for whom even the mildest criticism of the police constitutes a kind of heresy. It might be helpful to regard them as secular Thomists, who, displaying a certain imaginative immiseration, think of a free and ordinary life in the way that their ancestors once thought of perfect blessedness in Heaven. The reward wouldn't be so sweet—or, perhaps, worth having at all—if the process that assured it were shown to be a sham.

A few years ago, a minister who used to preach and prophesy at my church—which, by then, had moved from the little room south of 125th Street to a former Elks Lodge and community theatre a handful of blocks north—started posting on Facebook about how his study of the Bible had helped him conclude that nobody will be damned. He'd studied the Hebrew and the Aramaic and the Greek in which the Writ was written, and had concluded that the words most often translated as "hell" referred to a more general afterlife, or, at worst, to the daily, inward suffering that accompanies a willful persistence in wrongdoing. In John's Gospel, Jesus promises that in his death and, later, in his exaltation, he will "draw all men unto me"—everybody, from the most perfect to the absolute worst, their rapes, massacres, and enslavements notwithstanding. The sacrifice on the Cross was redemption enough for the entire world.

The minister was looking for a response, and it arrived quickly. The angriest interlocutors debated him, paragraph for sulfurous paragraph, studded with scriptural reference, for days on end,

in comment sections that unfurled beneath his status updates like long scrolls carrying the names of the dead, wherever the hell they'd gone. Some confronted him after service on Sundays. Others unfollowed him, in every sense of that word, and went on with their lives. Soon, he'd left their church and started one of his own, where he proclaimed his lenient gospel, pouring out pity and anger for those Christians whose so-called God was a petty torturer, until his little congregation petered out. Assured salvation couldn't keep people in pews, it turned out. The whole episode, in its intensity and its focus on the stakes of textual interpretation, was reminiscent of Lucas Hnath's recent play "The Christians," about a pastor who comes out against Hell and sparks not relief but an exegetical nightmare. "The Lord is telling me that you are going against His Word," someone blurts out during service.

That preacher wasn't alone, in his own time or in history. Origen, the scholar and Church Father, born late in the second century A.D., tended to believe that, in the end, all would be spared. (His more famous successor, Augustine of Hippo, fiercely opposed the idea, and he won the long-term doctrinal battle.) Almost two thousand years later, the Swiss theologian Hans Urs von Balthasar hedged the matter ever so slightly, arguing, in the aptly titled book "Dare We Hope That All Men Be Saved," that, while we can't be certain that Hell is empty, or at least very lightly populated—like a sweltering suburb, subject to infernal sprawl—it might be appropriate to hope, or even suspect, that it is. More recently, the bishop and gospel singer Carlton Pearson, whose acclaim in Pentecostal and evangelical circles brought him into acquaintance with Presidents George W. Bush and Bill Clinton, proclaimed that he no longer believed in everlasting separation from God. The genocide in Rwanda, he said, had left him unable to fathom that all those innocent, murdered non-Christians would burn. Pearson was roundly denounced and shunned, as thoroughly excommunicated as any Protestant can be. Now, as a kind of guru-entrepreneur, he calls himself a Metacostal, preaching "expanded consciousness, radically inclusive love, and Self-Actualization." There's a movie about him on Netflix,

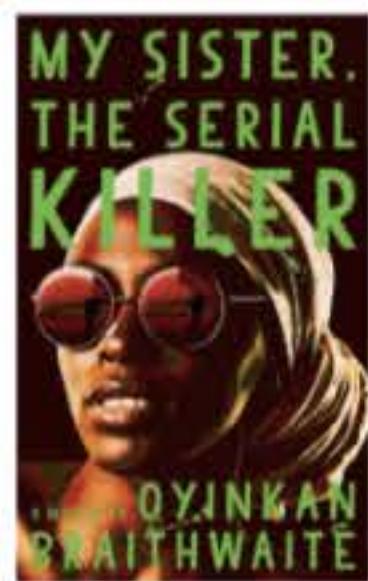
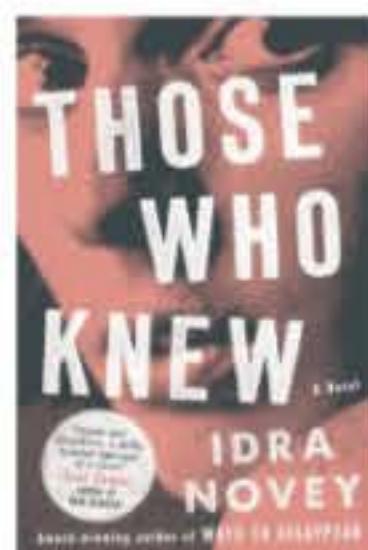
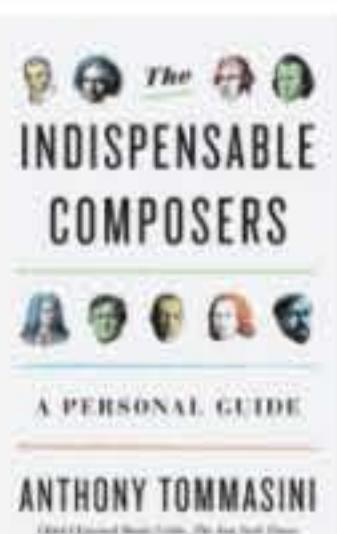
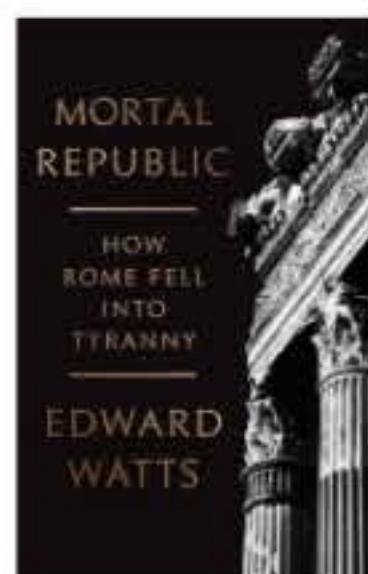
starring Chiwetel Ejiofor, which portrays him as a hero battling a blinkered, punitive church.

I admire the Universalists, but only to a point. I still worry more about the hell within than the one that might, or might not, offer me a place to stay later on. (I've been sifted a time or two.) One of my nightmares is to end up like Milton's Satan—whose absence from the "Book of Hell" is Bruce's one egregious mistake. In "Paradise Lost," Satan shows up in Eden, in search of Adam and Eve, certain that by force of will he can ease the pain of his damnation, making of Hell a suitable home. But, surrounded by the loveliness of the new creation, he feels his internal awfulness all the more: "Which way I fly is Hell; myself am Hell; / And in the lowest deep a lower deep/ Still threat'ning to devour me opens wide,/ To which the Hell I suffer seems a Heav'n." He and Hell belong to each other; where he goes, torture goes, too.

Mostly, though, I come back to Dorothy Day's questions: Why are some people caught and not others? Why do the "least of these" keep catching hell while the richest and most powerful slide through life unaccosted and unaccountable, leaving God knows what in their wake? There's a cruel paradox at work: the more secular our representations of Hell become, the more the poor and rejected and otherwise undesirable tend to populate it. The moral meaning's gone wrong, it seems. However grotesque, the child-detainment centers at the U.S.-Mexico border are not Hell but the reason for a Hell to exist, so that those responsible for them can one day get their deserts. Karma within the confines of a life span sounds great but looks false: so often, the wicked seem to be doing just fine. For all the barbarism of Hell as it is traditionally taught—its ludicrous time frame, its unfair and somewhat bigoted admissions policy—at least some of the right people turn up in it. What recourse is there, real or just hoped for, without it? Our most energetic recent social movements—Occupy, #MeToo, Black Lives Matter—have retribution in mind. Bad bankers, sexual aggressors, killer cops: let's see them finally get their due. But satisfaction arrives slowly, if at all. The bad guys are back onstage, back at their desks, back on the beat.

Those movements sometimes seem to clash, in spirit, with another growing concern: prison abolitionism, which might be thought of as a kind of secular universalism. That movement's strongest moral argument is that the conflation of justice and punishment merely adds more pain to the cruelty already at work in the world. Those of us who believe in an objective morality but wince at the idea of damnation should probably take a harder look at imprisonment, especially life sentences and sequestrations suffered by people like William Blake. Could we imagine a new justice, characterized more by mercy than by the threat of the pit? "The call for prison abolition urges us to imagine and strive for a very different social landscape," the academic and activist Angela Davis, one of the movement's most prominent theorists and spokespersons, has said. To redirect our creativity and train it toward Heaven—and, by extension, our notions of the good life on Earth—would require a kind of revolution in our thinking. As the "Book of Hell" illustrates, again and again, we have afforded lavish attention to the specifics of punishment and left Heaven woefully undersketched. Perhaps the sublime is so far beyond our comprehension as to leave us inarticulate, incapable of rendering its details. Or maybe we're just daunted by the implications. It might be time to heed the prophet Isaiah and set the captives free.

Hell is so much easier to picture. The recent U.N. report on the climate forecasts, with devastating frankness, worldwide catastrophe, absent a sudden upsurge of yet undetectable stewardship and coöperation. Meanwhile, Trump's E.P.A. has dismantled an expert panel on air pollution. This is, of course, a disaster. Nobody has a right to feel very optimistic about the outcome, and there's a vast unfairness at work: even the most ardent recyclers and carbon tiptoeers—not to mention those without a wide range of options when it comes to what and how they consume—will feel the burn. But, here, as almost nowhere else in the visible world, the lines of cause and effect, neglect and decay, sin and punishment, are plain. You sow the coal and reap the whirlwind. Heat the air, and let the icebergs roll on righteously, like a mighty stream. First comes the flood, then comes the fire. It matters, very much, what you do. ♦



## BRIEFLY NOTED

**Mortal Republic**, by Edward J. Watts (Basic). Rome's imperial expansion starting in the mid-second century B.C. brought great wealth but also, as this incisive history shows, undermined a political system based on consensus and collaboration, ultimately tipping the Roman Republic into tyranny. Watts describes how the rise of an economic élite and increasing inequality brought about populist sentiment that was easily exploited by nefarious politicians. The parallels to the present day are striking: as the rich accumulated power, old standards of morality and decency gave way. After a century of increasing corruption and violence, Romans hungry for stability welcomed the autocracy of Augustus. Watts says that this outcome wasn't inevitable. Had Romans refused to tolerate minor threats to the rule of law, "the Republic could have been saved."

**The Indispensable Composers**, by Anthony Tommasini (Penguin). When the author, the chief classical-music critic for the *Times*, published a series of articles about musical "greatness," his Top Ten list of composers aroused strong reactions. Building on that list, he tells the story of four centuries of music in essays on seventeen composers, from Monteverdi to Stravinsky. Although the book begins by arguing against the obsession with greatness as a category and ends by declaring the concept inapplicable to living composers, it generally hews closely to established ideas about the canon. The essays combine accounts of individual works with explication of concepts such as counterpoint, sonata form, and bel canto—all suffused with memoir and colored by a lifelong love of opera.

**Those Who Knew**, by Idra Novey (Viking). A classic murder-mystery trope ignites this clever, sometimes chilling novel. In an unnamed island nation, a bus hits a young woman who works for a charismatic progressive senator. Was it an accident, or was she pushed? Lena, a middle-aged professor, suspects murder, based on her own traumatic relationship with the senator, back when they were students protesting a brutal regime. Her quest to expose him guides a story that feels hyper-relevant in a landscape shaped by the #MeToo movement. Its core questions resound: Will there be a reckoning with the misogyny of powerful men? Can their victims overthrow not just individuals but the system that upholds them?

**My Sister, the Serial Killer**, by Oyinkan Braithwaite (Double-day). In this début novel about the intense relationship between two Nigerian sisters, one, Ayoola, has a habit of murdering her boyfriends, and relies on her competent and measured sister, Korede, to clean up. While Korede frets about consequences, Ayoola, who is staggeringly good-looking, remains fancy-free, unscathed by her actions: "Days ago, we gave a man to the sea, but here she is, dancing." A fast-paced plot proceeds in unadorned prose, but the novel is also steeped in a darkly comic wit that subtly draws attention to the importance placed on female beauty in a corrupt, patriarchal society. A police officer who shows up starts "stumbling over himself for Ayoola's sake."

## BOOKS

## BLANK LOOKS

*Seeing and beholding in the poetry of Sally Wen Mao.*

BY DAN CHIASSON



Sally Wen Mao's new book of poems, "Oculus," borrows its slightly menacing title from the Latin word for "eye," which also refers to, among other things, a virtual-reality company and the eye-shaped skylight at the Guggenheim Museum in New York City. There are eyes everywhere in "Oculus," but not all of them are blessed with sight. Some are all-seeing, panoptic; others are yearning and blinkered, unable to return the gaze they attract. These poems are haunted by images of human faces staring out from all kinds of screens, faces that are themselves screens upon which the world projects its fantasies and anxieties. "The

stories about our lives do not have faces," Mao writes. Her strange and morally succinct book is, in part, a sustained defense of writing. Mao's poems intervene in a culture glutted with visual images, on behalf of what she calls "the self you want to hide"—the "sad, pretty thing," lost behind the images. "Because being seen," she writes elsewhere, "has a different meaning to someone/with my face."

Mao, who was born in China, lives in California. "Oculus" is her second book. Its first title poem—there are two, at the beginning and end of the book, and they operate as poles—is both elegy and investigation. In 2014, an Insta-

*In "Oculus," the plasticity of identity is at once frightening and liberating.*

gram account documented what appeared to be a suicide in Shanghai. A series of photos showed a young woman's devastation after a breakup: in one image, her legs dangled out of her bedroom window, over the city below. The posts quickly went viral. In the poem, Mao views "the dead girl's live/photo feed" from her own bedroom, on her own screen:

How the dead girl fell, awaiting a hand to hold,  
eyes to behold her as the lights clicked on

and she posed for her picture, long eyelashes  
all wet, legs tapered, bright as thorns.

Instead of the missing lover's "eyes to behold her," there are only the eyes of peering strangers. From the other side of the world, they can look into the young woman's home, her imagined, perhaps extinguished, life illuminating their own. Mao's handheld device makes the woman's lack of "a hand to hold" even more bitter. The "feed" where all this takes place exposes Mao's hunger, and ours. These appetites, Mao suggests, are a morally serious matter: she's both culpable and vulnerable, a consumer at grave risk of being consumed.

The poems in "Oculus" are rangy, protean, contradictory. They offer an alternative to the selfie, that static reduction of a person to her most photogenic poses. For Mao, the woman in Shanghai is just a fixed set of images. At the other end of the spectrum is Anna May Wong, the first Chinese-American movie star, who acted in Hollywood films in the nineteen-twenties and thirties, and who becomes a sort of hero in Mao's book, appearing again and again in a sequence of poems that acts as a unifying thread. In "Anna May Wong on Silent Films," Wong describes her own "silence" in a voice otherwise denied her. "If I bared the grooves/in my spine, made my lust known," she reveals:

the reel would remind me  
that someone with my face  
could never be loved.

Wong says that, because she almost never got to kiss the romantic lead, "I had to marry/ my own cinematic death," like the character she played in "The

Toll of the Sea," a 1922 film inspired by "Madame Butterfly"—and not so unlike the Instagrammed woman, nearly a century later. A note before one poem tells us that "The Toll of the Sea" was "the first successful two-color (red and green) Technicolor feature." Those colors, recalling the commands of a simple playground game, catalyze the poem, but wind up embodying contradiction:

GREEN means go, so run—now—  
GREEN the color of the siren sea, whose favors are a mortgage upon the soul  
RED means stop, before the cliffs jag downward  
RED the color of the shore that welcomes

In this world, green stands for both escape and annihilation, red for both peril and relief. But in the poem new colors quickly emerge: first white, "the color of erasure," then blue, which stands for "the ocean that drowns the liars," "the shore where the girl keeps living," and the place where she awakens, "prismatic, childless, free." Mao's imagination has picked up where the film's clunky innovations and racist tropes faltered.

Contemporary poetry is full of scrupulously researched, rather lifeless "project" books; a lesser poet than Mao might have stuck to the historical Wong, out of some misplaced sense of fealty or respect. But Mao's fabricated Wong is a wild creation: she has a "time machine" and rides a "comet,/ to the future," where she makes out with Bruce Lee and hangs around the set of "Chungking Express," yet she's also shunted into minor roles in "The Last Samurai," "Kill Bill," and "Memoirs of a Geisha." Then, strangely, she goes viral as the world's most disappointing "webcam girl." Fully clothed, just sitting there, she performs her interiority by the most classic means imaginable, by reading "passages/ from Russian novels." Indignant "netizens" subscribe and then cancel their subscriptions, "ranting on forums/ about my prudish act." Wong is reborn as a screenshot, and her personas multiply even further: she becomes a purple panda, a hyena, and, finally, movingly, a sea creature wearing "dresses/ made of kelp":

Soon a crop of young girls will join me,  
renouncing their dresses to wade  
in the thrill of being animal.

It's not any one manifestation that pro-

vides this "thrill"; it's the plasticity of the self, delighting in its own freedom to try on different guises, new forms of camouflage, for the pure "animal" joy of change.

In "Anna May Wong Goes Viral," Mao celebrates the imagination as a force that can transform the body, in the same way that teen-agers apply new skins chosen from a social-media app. But Mao understands that transformation is not always transcendent. In her poems, the "animal" body can also become detritus, like the carcasses of big game after the trophies have been collected. In "Teledildonics," modern-day lotus-eaters lost behind V.R. headsets masturbate one another with long-distance sex toys; in "Provenance: A Vivisection," flayed and preserved human bodies are put on display as part of a macabre art exhibit.

Near the close of the book, the second title poem revises the first. This time, "Oculus" is set at the Guggenheim, among Duchamps, Modiglianis, and "skeletal Giacometti." Here, in 2017, Solange Knowles performed in front of fans who had surrendered their devices at the door and dressed all in white, per Solange's instructions. Mao evokes the performance under the big skylight, "through which all fears still burned," and the audience watching "without cameras/except our eyes and faces." The scene is joyous and transformative, but also confected and exclusive.

In a photograph of the event, taken from above and later posted on Instagram, people's bodies seem to dissolve into the white space that surrounds them. You can almost make out faces, but you can't say who's who. There were famous people in that crowd, indistinguishable from the rest, now reduced to anonymity, though, of course, many of them were identified in the coverage that followed. The performance represented one way out of the self-consuming social-media cycle, but for just a moment, and for only a lucky few. The real escape, Mao's work suggests, is poetry, which tracks the mind as it moves through embodiments not transmittable by visual means. I thought of the sublime conclusion of Yeats's "Among School Children": "O body swayed to music, O brightening glance,/ How can we know the dancer from the dance?" ♦

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## POP MUSIC

## LOVE IN PEACETIME

*Sharon Van Etten's glowing, grounded snapshots.*

BY AMANDA PETRUSICH



*"Remind Me Tomorrow"* is an ominous-sounding album about joyful things.

**I** "Told You Everything," the first song on Sharon Van Etten's new album, "Remind Me Tomorrow," could be a message to her longtime fans. "Sitting at the bar, I told you everything," she sings in a low, quavering voice. "You said, 'Holy shit.'" Van Etten is thirty-seven and has been recording music since 2005. "Remind Me Tomorrow" is her fifth studio album. She is an inventive, earnest, and empathetic songwriter, and her discography is full of intimate confessions about heartbreak and what happens to a person when love cracks up. If you are in the midst of a period of grievous romantic devastation—or still recovering from one—Van Etten has at least a dozen songs that will convince you that you're not alone. "Remind Me Tomorrow" isn't a redemption narrative, exactly—Van Etten is too wary and smart to believe

in clear sailing—but it's the first of her records to linger more on contentedness than on pain.

In the four years since the release of "Are We There," her previous record, Van Etten has had a baby boy (with her partner and collaborator, Zeke Hutchins), enrolled at Brooklyn College (she studied psychology), scored a film (a collection of spectral, moving pieces for Katherine Dieckmann's "Strange Weather"), and appeared on television (she was cast as Rachel on Netflix's supernatural series "The OA" and played herself on David Lynch's reboot of "Twin Peaks"). That's a complicated tangle of obligations, and the title of "Remind Me Tomorrow" is a nod to the encumbrances of her new, bigger life. It is also, she has said, a playful reference to Apple's Remind Me Tomorrow button, which al-

lows users to delay a software update indefinitely, should they choose to keep clicking it—a modern metaphor for the demurral of the overwhelmed.

Previously, Van Etten sang of the vagaries of loving too hard, or, worse, of loving the wrong person. "Remind Me Tomorrow" is focussed, lyrically, on how it feels to find peace after a long stretch of ache. It is full of glowing, grounded snapshots, as if Van Etten were trying to pause and capture fulfilled moments so that she might savor them longer. "Malibu," a road-trip song that takes place on California's Highway 1, is a slow encomium to a carefree couple steering a "little red number" along the Pacific Coast. Van Etten has written about these sorts of scenarios before—dreamy lost weekends, salty breezes, the world becoming so small and complete that it can only accommodate two people. The difference, this time, is that the fantasy turns real, domestic: "I walked in the door/The Black Crowes playin' as he cleaned the floor/I thought I couldn't love him any more." Van Etten regards her present relationship with the wonderment and gratitude of someone who had perhaps briefly given up on love altogether.

Van Etten's voice is muscular, unpretentious, and rich, and she has never been quite so in control of it before. Sometimes, at the start of a chorus, her vocals will swoop gracefully but viciously, like an eagle arcing through the sky. On "No One's Easy to Love," a skronking song about assimilating the past (it's the track that feels the most explicitly influenced by experimental music—in particular, the art-punk band Suicide's album "Ghost Rider," from 1977), her voice shifts from flat and steady to airy and angelic. It makes my stomach drop each time I hear it.

In 2012, Van Etten had a small hit with "Serpents," from her album "Tramp." The song was featured in the fourth season of "The Walking Dead," and all that year it seemed to be playing on a constant loop in fashionable cafés. "Teenage" is the sort of track that could earn her a similar ubiquity. It describes an in-between moment in the arc of a human life, before adolescence ends and we're expected to transform into a whole person. I recall hungering at that age for the newness and power of adulthood, but

nonetheless feeling like a child who needed protecting—and being ashamed of both sentiments. Janis Ian (“At Seventeen”) and Stevie Nicks (“Edge of Seventeen”) have each written about the danger and the power of that moment, and how the feeling of being half in, half out can linger for a lifetime. “Inside, we’re all seventeen with red lips,” Laurence Olivier once said.

Van Etten’s take on the subject is a propulsive lament: “I used to be free,” she sings. “I used to be seventeen.” Swirling guitars give the impression of a landscape blurring through car windows—the sweet elation of moving fast. Van Etten goes on grappling with ideas of time: “Follow my shadow/Around your corner/I used to be seventeen/Now you’re just like me.” Three minutes in, she’s lost her grip on something. It’s the only time on the record when she lets her voice go ragged and wild. “I know what you’re gonna be/I know that you’re gonna be,” she screams.

Although the album’s lyrics are often optimistic, even grateful, its sound is primarily dark, marked by throbbing synthesizers and heavy, syncopated beats. Van Etten has said that she took sonic inspiration from the menacing British band Portishead and from Nick Cave’s “Skeleton Tree,” the album he was making when his fifteen-year-old son, Arthur, died after falling off a cliff, in 2015. Most of the new songs were written on an analog Roland Jupiter-4 synthesizer, which was first produced in the late nineteen-seventies and is useful for adding reverb and delay to a melody, making it feel uncanny. Van Etten named one of her songs for the instrument, a hazy, anxious dirge about how disorienting it is to finally find the right person to love. “Baby baby baby / I’ve been waiting waiting waiting / My whole life for someone like you,” she sings. The murky churning behind her sounds like a storm lumbering from the horizon, inching closer to home.

It might seem counterintuitive to write such an ominous-sounding album about joyful things, but, just as misery can be liberating, happiness can be a funny kind of burden. “When you ain’t got nothing, you got nothing to lose,” Bob Dylan once sang.

“Seventeen” isn’t the only song on “Re-

mind Me Tomorrow” in which Van Etten refers to a shadow. The image could be an allusion to her son, or, perhaps, to some lost or misbegotten version of herself. Sometimes big, seismic changes can incite an unexpected kind of mourning. Even when we don’t necessarily love or value our old ways, we know them, and they linger. On occasion, we accidentally protect or perpetuate them. On “You Shadow,” Van Etten seems to be singing to her past. “You ain’t nothin’ / You never won,” she reminds herself.

Van Etten is a deft and sophisticated lyricist, and she’s especially affecting when she abandons or dismantles language and narrative entirely, slipping into a hyper-emotive, almost nonsensical state. On “Tarifa,” one of the best tracks on “Are We There,” her lyrics are gasped and half formed—it is a profound way to express the exhaustion of deep love:

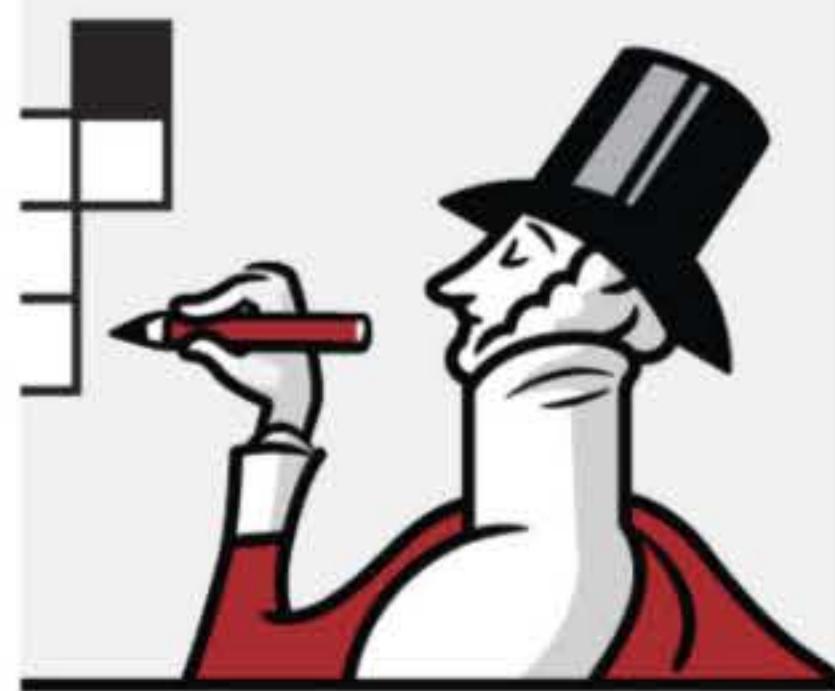
Tell me when  
Tell me when is this over?  
Chewed you out  
Chew me out when I’m stupid  
I don’t wanna  
Everyone else pales  
Send in the owl  
Tell me I’m not a child.

She does something similar on “Comeback Kid,” the new record’s first single, though now she sounds triumphant and self-possessed, certain of her trajectory:

I’m the runaway  
I’m the stay out late  
I’m recovering.

Van Etten returned to school before making “Remind Me Tomorrow” in part because she is considering becoming a therapist one day. Her work certainly expresses an instinct for listening to, understanding, and validating troublesome feelings; her best songs reflect something true about how difficult it is to navigate our own hearts, to say nothing of responding to the whims of others. Becoming both a parent and a romantic partner—not only allowing yourself to fully love another being but to agree to *be* loved, to be counted on and required for all eternity—often makes us doubt ourselves and fall into a panic. Wondering whether or not you can bear the needs of others is inevitably a dizzying self-interrogation. Van Etten is a searcher and a fighter. Right now, it sounds as if she’s doing just fine. ♦

## Introducing The New Yorker Crossword Puzzle



1. Stack for a publisher’s assistant.
2. Dulce et \_\_\_\_\_ (Horatian maxim).
3. Flavoring used in biscuits.
4. Landmark 1973 court case, familiarly.

Do the rest of the puzzle,  
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ON TELEVISION

## WARM FUZZIES

*The upbeat appeal of "Good Trouble" and "Brooklyn Nine-Nine."*

BY EMILY NUSSBAUM



Early in the pilot for “Good Trouble,” a spinoff of the family drama “The Fosters,” the show’s heroines, sisters Mariana and Callie Adams Foster, visit their new home, in Los Angeles. They’ve signed on at the Coterie, a bargain-rent “intentional community,” and the decision looks like a bad call. Their room has mice. The bathroom is communal and coed. Their housemates seem like millennial cartoons, the type most shows would turn into satirical mince-meat: improv comics, a “body-positive Instagram influencer,” a prickly Black Lives Matter activist. “What’s a Sad Girl Party?” Callie asks, nervously eying the bulletin board.

But, right away, those cartoons get shading. The activist, Malika (Zuri Adele, the standout among the newcomers), came up through the foster system, as Callie and Mariana did, al-

though, unlike them, she was never adopted. The flaky landlady is a lesbian, like the Adams Foster’s moms, but she’s closeted to her Asian-immigrant parents. And, while the sisters’ jobs—Callie is a clerk for a conservative judge; Mariana is a software engineer—may be snake pits, the Coterie turns out to be surprisingly functional in a crisis. By the final credits, the show, airing on Freeform, has established its idealistic premise: even the most alien world can become, if you’re patient and curious enough to stick with it, an intentional community, which is a fancy way of saying a family.

Like “The Fosters,” which ended in June, after five seasons, “Good Trouble” is a show with a mission, unapologetic about its interest in social justice—its two main plots involve sexism at a tech startup and a case of a cop shooting an

unarmed black kid. But, also like its predecessor, these themes are expressed through character; figures that other shows might treat as sidekicks or case studies become our lens on the world. It’s a smart trick, which lets the show be inspirational without curdling into agitprop. Callie, a principled rape survivor with a self-destructive streak, and Mariana, a bubbly shape-shifter, were two of the richest characters on “The Fosters,” played by two of the strongest actresses, Maia Mitchell and Cierra Ramirez. The focus on them tweaks the material, demographically, turning it into a kind of enlightened teen show, brashly interpreting the civil-rights hero John Lewis’s slogan “Get in good trouble” in both political and personal ways. Callie and Mariana are determined to change the world, but, like Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez, they’re going to dance on a few rooftops along the way. (And also lose a few phones, have flings with mysterious bisexual sculptors, and make ill-considered, late-night Instagram posts.)

There are lots of ways that this recipe could go wrong—the high jinks could trivialize the politics, or the grittier elements could make the personal plots look silly. But the first episode does an efficient job of establishing three central settings: in addition to the Coterie, there’s Callie’s clerkship, where her Ivy League peers vie for the attention of the judge (crisply played by Roger Bart), and Mariana’s dot-com gig, whose diverse sales pitch turns out to be a sham. Aesthetically, “Good Trouble” is a little on the manic side, with extra servings of eye candy and dance anthems, as well as a scrambled chronology, a structural experiment that varies in effectiveness. The show’s decadent streak feels a little effortful, too—the Coterie runs out of toilet paper, but it has an awfully well-maintained rooftop pool. Mariana and Callie strip down to their bras a lot, a side effect, perhaps, of the kinky arms race on channels aimed at younger viewers, like Freeform and the CW. How you gonna keep ‘em down on the farm, after they’ve seen “Riverdale”?

But, as the episodes glide by, the series hits a satisfying groove, skillfully mixing light and heavy. When Callie is assigned to clerk on the police-shooting case—an injustice that Malika has been protesting—she worries that she’s

been chosen as the “counter-clerk,” hired only to stress-test her boss’s originalist arguments. Meanwhile, Mariana struggles to cope with her “brogrammer” colleagues, and, being Mariana, she drifts into partying to escape her troubles. In quick and often funny sketches, the series does such a nifty job illuminating the atmosphere at her slick dot-com—with its Ping-Pong tables and cliquey cafeteria, showily industrial elevators and meritocratic slogans concealing hidden biases—that it could easily be the setting of its own show.

Many characters from “The Fosters” stop by, among them the girls’ moms, Stef and Lena, who give the hippie collective the side-eye. Nobody loves change, including fans of the kind of television show that offers an escape from real-world darkness. But “Good Trouble” is a strong renovation, at least so far. It feels built to disarm skeptics.

**T**here’s a similar kind of defiant positivity to “Brooklyn Nine-Nine,” a sitcom that got cancelled by Fox last spring and then—after fan outrage—was picked up by NBC. Set in a police station run by the buttoned-up Raymond Holt (Andre Braugher), “Brooklyn Nine-Nine” is part of the amiable, inclusive universe of network sitcoms overseen by Michael Schur, each about a workplace that doubles as a family. Schur came up as a writer on the American translation of “The Office,” which gradually warmed up the nihilism of the British original. Then came “Parks and Recreation,” Schur’s Obama-era valentine to good government. His most recent creation is the sweetly trippy series “The Good Place,” in which the workplace in question is the afterlife. All these shows are smart stories about alternative families; they also make ideal family viewing, at once daffy and deep.

“Brooklyn Nine-Nine”—which was co-created by Schur and Daniel Goor, who wrote for “Parks and Recreation”—lacks the high-concept intensity of, say, “The Good Place,” in which the characters debate philosophy between fart jokes. But, while it’s superficially a more basic workplace sitcom, along the lines of “Taxi” and “Barney Miller,” it shares “The Good Place”’s interest in T. M. Scanlon’s philosophical theme: that human decency derives from “what we

owe to each other.” Like “Good Trouble,” “Brooklyn Nine-Nine” is about a loving community, with a cast that includes the black, gay, John Philip Sousa-loving Captain Holt and his bookish white husband; another black cop, the hyperenthusiastic family man Terry (played by Terry Crews); and two Latina women, the Leslie Knope-ish Amy (Melissa Fumero), from an educated Cuban-American background, and Rosa (Stephanie Beatriz), a bisexual loner with working-class roots. There’s also Andy Samberg’s character, Jake Peralta, who began as a white-guy prankster in the Bill Murray mold but then sweetened, blending into the ensemble. He’s the show’s ostensible romantic hero, but its trickster is Gina Linetti, a Bugs Bunny-level chaos creator, played by the slapstick mastermind Chelsea Peretti. “Fun fact,” she tells another character, Charles. “The average American marriage lasts fewer than two days.” Informed that it’s not true, Gina calmly replies, “It doesn’t have to be. It’s *commentary*.”

Binge-watching the first five seasons, you can see “Brooklyn Nine-Nine” evolve: the jokes speed up, the “cold opens” get more surreal, the characters deepen. The callbacks, like Jake’s “name of your sex tape” bit, replicate like Tribbles. The creators have added some real-world stakes, too, including a legitimately disturbing plot about prison and another about Holt’s failed run for police commissioner. The setting would seem to call for dark humor, and sometimes the show does go there—but it’s reflexively averse to cringe gags. Its specialty is scoring laughs without taking the shortcut of humiliation.

It can be tricky to jump into “Brooklyn Nine-Nine” so late in the game—and it’s possible to get burned out by the Schuroverse’s heavy soul-mate orientation. (Must *everyone* have a chill, last-minute wedding?) But, as a superfan, I liked seeing Jake and Amy’s honeymoon land on a note of nerdy, “Die Hard”-themed romance. The next episode features a truly hilarious “Miami Vice”-ish flashback that gives the two oldest cops, Scully and Hitchcock, a backstory involving cocaine and a hot-wings concoction called “slut sauce.” “It was the eighties,” Hitchcock protests, perhaps referring as much to TV fantasies as to the real world. Scully adds, “Police weren’t perfect then like they are today!” ♦



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THE THEATRE

## THE BLAME GAME

*Rage and recovery in "Blue Ridge."*

BY ALEXANDRA SCHWARTZ



**S**et in a Christian halfway house, Abby Rosebrock's "Blue Ridge" (at the Atlantic Theatre Company) is a recovery story that dispenses with the dramatic trope of relapse. Nobody falls off the wagon or gets rushed away in an ambulance as onlookers sob. Rosebrock, a thirty-two-year-old Brooklyn-based playwright and actress who grew up in South Carolina, keeps her characters committed to their newfound sobriety, which isn't to say that they are blessed with untroubled minds. Her subject is healing, the queasy, fragile calm that follows the storm of addiction and abuse;

she's interested in the ways in which damaged people try—or don't—to fix themselves by untangling the harm that they've done from the harm that has been done to them. Who is really at fault for our failures? Should we blame God? Society? Genetics? Or must we invariably point the finger at ourselves?

Alison (an electric Marin Ireland) knows exactly who's responsible for her problems: men. We're in the living room of St. John's Service House—the best halfway house in southern Appalachia, according to a search she did on Yelp—which looks as if it were

*Marin Ireland is electric as a brash, bristling newcomer at a halfway house.*

last redecorated during the Carter Administration, although a wide picture window offers a soothing glimpse of trees through slatted blinds. It's a Wednesday evening in September, time for weekly Bible study. Alison, a thirtysomething former high-school English teacher, is the program's newest arrival, and Grace (Nicole Lewis), its co-director and den mother, has asked her to introduce herself with a verse of Scripture. But Alison doesn't really go in for the God stuff. Instead, she offers two Carrie Underwood songs, sacred texts that she can actually relate to: "Jesus, Take the Wheel," in which a woman whose car is spinning out on a highway prays for divine intervention, and "Before He Cheats," whose narrator, forsaking Jesus' teachings, destroys her fickle lover's truck, an act that Alison finds justifiable. "Well, by this point in life, all the accumulated pain an' hopelessness an' annihilatin' degradation uh bein' a woman in this sexual economy've juss . . . racked the speaker's brain and body, like a cancer," she explains. (Rosebrock's script is written in a regional twang that looks jarring, even patronizing, on the page but rolls easily off the performers' tongues.) "Frankly, she doesn't know how to surrender those fillins to Christ anymore."

This is more than a close reading of some country-and-Western lyrics. Not long ago, Alison herself took an axe to a Honda owned by the principal of her school, a mentor who reeled her in romantically and then jilted her. That's why she's stuck at St. John's, selling aboveground pools and doing community service as part of a court-mandated rehabilitation, instead of in her classroom at Blue Ridge High, a rough school that she nonetheless adores. She doesn't have substance issues, just a major rage problem and a diagnosis of "intermittent explosive disorder," though she claims that her lawyer made that part up; it's too difficult to admit that, like an addict, she suffers from something she can't control.

Alison has learned to cover her fear and neediness with a brash, mouthy manner that seems to spell trouble, but she's welcomed by her St. John's cohort: Wade (Kyle Beltran), an easy-

going, guitar-strumming optimist who's kicking a pain-pill habit, and the openhearted Cherie (Kristolyn Lloyd), a recovering alcoholic and a former teacher herself. They choose to see Alison's whiplash mania as high-spiritedness, and extend her their friendship—no small thing for this prickly, lonely woman. Alison saves her suspicion, and her sass, for Hern (Chris Stack), the program's other leader, a handsome, hangdog pastor. "He gives off a smell," she tells Cherie. "Kinda masquerades as sensitivity, but bespeaks a deep unexamined dysfunction." When a new resident, Cole (Peter Mark Kendall), arrives, Alison is quick to typecast him, too: poor white hillbilly conservative, probably a woman-hating homophobe. Protectively hunched over on a couch in baggy jeans and a beanie, Cole does look the part; he reminded me of the kind of pasty, silently seething boy who might take up a tiki torch after watching too many alt-right videos on YouTube.

In fact, Cole turns out to be gentle and a little slow, and he, too, is nursing a terrible psychic wound. Alison, scrupulously committed to denial, can't see it at first, but Cole recognizes her as a kindred spirit, damaged and desperate for real love, the kind that comforts the soul. St. John's, as Grace likes to remind the residents, is a safe space, but Alison can't feel fully safe anywhere, because her greatest threat comes from within. One night, while the others are meditating outside (it's that kind of place), she stays in to fold laundry. Cole enters to get a jacket and sees

her beating her head with her fists, crying out in agony, "Why did you make me like this?"

Later, considering this wrenching scene, I thought of Milton's formulation of free will, in "Paradise Lost," in which God says that he made humankind "sufficient to have stood, though free to fall." *Why did you make me like this?* Cherie, Wade, and Cole all follow the Twelve Steps, which call for participants to put their will and their lives in the care of God, presumably a benevolent God with a plan. But Alison has been left to fall too many times by too many people to believe that God has any interest in catching her now.

There's a lot of tenderness and friendly understanding in this play—maybe too much. Its success depends on Ireland, who is perfect in the role, bawdy and bristling, talking a mile a minute as she lashes her lanky body around the stage. Her performance has an element of slapstick, and Taibi Magar, the play's director, makes smart comic use of her, as she does of the rest of the strong ensemble cast, playing up the quick, humorous volleys of Rosebrock's script without letting us lose sight of Alison's pain. Collective female anger has got so much good press lately as a galvanizing force for political change that it is jolting to be reminded how ugly and crippling the emotion can be for a woman experiencing it in isolation.

The freedom to act freely means the freedom to screw up royally, a theme that Rosebrock touches on in the play's second half, when things, somewhat predictably, go to pieces. After Alison sniffs out the emotional attachment

that is developing between Cherie and Hern, who has a girlfriend he seems unwilling to either love or leave, she confronts him, and, through him, every man who has persuaded her to open up and then let her down. She's right to call Hern out, but it's not her job to do so. Cherie is furious when she discovers that Alison has been interfering behind her back. Race is at play in this fraught dynamic; Cherie, like Grace and Wade, is black, and she doesn't want her white friend to secretly advocate on her behalf. She needs to own her choices, especially the ones she is most likely to regret.

That's what it means to recover, and here Rosebrock is saying something worth listening to about women and victimization, even if she hasn't entirely worked through it. "Thass not yer fault, thass men's fault," Alison tells Cherie. She means everything: pain, rage, sadness, fear. That may be true more often than not—certainly, it feels good to believe it—but to be faultless all the time is to be helpless, too, with no ability to heal oneself. In a devastating scene late in the play, Alison and Cole, brought together by shock and mutual need, manage to briefly connect, only for Alison to initiate the kind of rote, transactional sex that she has earlier complained is dehumanizing to women. She understands what it is to be debased but can't see Cole clearly enough to grasp that he can also be humiliated. That kind of power—to damage a man the way that men have damaged her—is exactly what Alison has been chasing, and, when she finally gets it, it leaves her feeling hurt, small, and profoundly alone. ♦

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VOLUME XCIV, NO. 45, January 21, 2019. THE NEW YORKER (ISSN 0028792X) is published weekly (except for five combined issues: February 18 & 25, June 10 & 17, July 8 & 15, August 5 & 12, and December 23 & 30) by Condé Nast, which is a division of Advance Magazine Publishers Inc. PRINCIPAL OFFICE: Condé Nast, 1 World Trade Center, New York, NY 10007. Chris Mitchell, chief business officer; Risa Aronson, vice-president, revenue; James Guilfoyle, executive director of finance and business operations; Fabio Bertoni, general counsel. Condé Nast: Robert A. Sauerberg, Jr., president & chief executive officer; David E. Geithner, chief financial officer; Pamela Drucker Mann, chief revenue and marketing officer. Periodicals postage paid at New York, NY, and at additional mailing offices. Canadian Goods and Services Tax Registration No. 123242885-RT0001.

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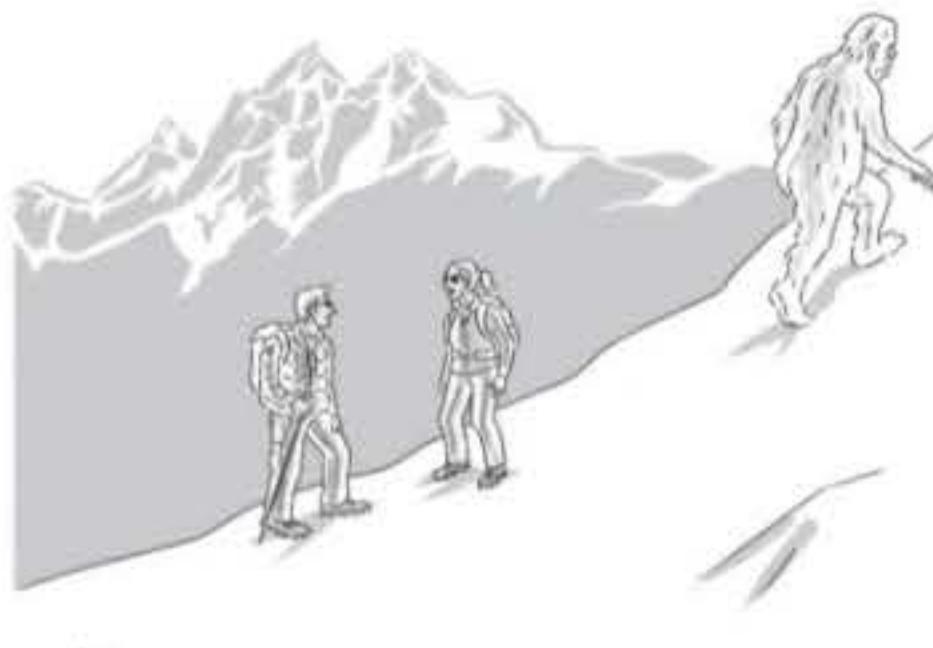
Each week, we provide a cartoon in need of a caption. You, the reader, submit a caption, we choose three finalists, and you vote for your favorite. Caption submissions for this week's cartoon, by P. C. Vey, must be received by Sunday, January 20th. The finalists in the January 7th contest appear below. We will announce the winner, and the finalists in this week's contest, in the February 4th issue. Anyone age thirteen or older can enter or vote. To do so, and to read the complete rules, visit [contest.newyorker.com](http://contest.newyorker.com).

### THIS WEEK'S CONTEST



“ ”

### THE FINALISTS



*“I’m sorry, Todd. But he just  
seems better prepared for what’s ahead.”*  
Paul D. Cullen, Jr., Arlington, Va.

*“Don’t bring a camera, you said.  
Just enjoy the experience, you said.”*  
John R. Oshin, Portland, Ore.

*“He says the real abomination is your cargo pants.”*  
Arthur Crittenden, St. Louis, Mo.

### THE WINNING CAPTION



*“And now—I’ve got an old score to settle.”*  
Emily Jon Mitchell, New York City

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